MANHUNT

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SEPTEMBER, 1957

35 CENTS

DEATH OF A STRIPPER

by

Sherry La Verne

"The Seven-Veils Girl"

•

A JOHN J. MALONE NOVELETTE

BY

CRAIG RICE

•

Also:

TALMAGE POWELL

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•

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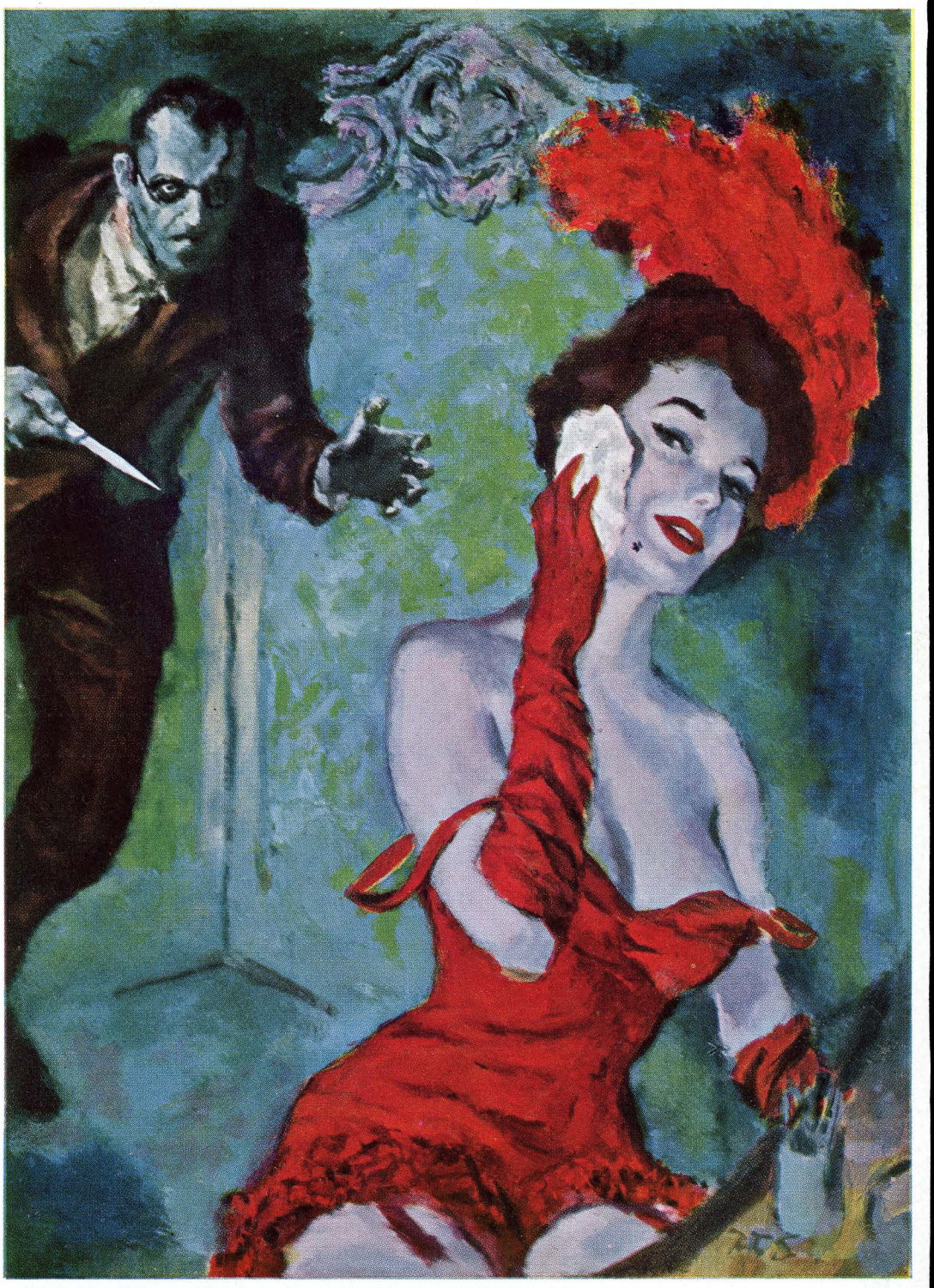

MANHUNT

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"We can play cards," Archie said. "Strip poker. You could only lose once, honey." A red flush came up into her cheeks.

one summer night

by BRYCE WALTON

I LAY THERE with my eyes closed listening to Martha taking a shower upstairs, and then listening to her walking back along the hall to the guest room.

I kept thinking about what Archie Graff had been telling me about women. I'd been trying to tell her how I felt for almost two weeks, ever since she came to stay with us, but I hadn't been able to do anything but think about it. Sometimes I'd imagine doing it, but now I ought to really do something, like Archie had told me.

I, finally, did get up and went up the stairs. My legs were so tired I could hardly walk. As I went down the hall, I heard an electric fan. My heart was pounding so fast and loud it felt like it was going to bust, and I got so dizzy once I almost fell down. And then I saw her lying on the bed, her dress pulled way up and her blouse open down the front and her arms and legs spread out as she lay there with the fan blowing on her.

It was hot all right. It was the hottest day we had that summer in Lakeville.

I wanted to duck on past the door, but I couldn't move. My stomach felt empty and cold and hot, and I was so mixed up I could have cried like a rabbit I once caught in a net.

I was scared, but I wanted to look and look. I wanted to go in there, and then I thought she would scream, or maybe laugh at me if I tried it; then I thought she would just close her eyes and want to kiss me. I thought about how I'd always imagined it would be, and I didn't want to think about it. I felt one way and the opposite way about everything there ever was and I felt like the cruddest jerk that ever lived and wanted to die. My face was burning.

My face was really burning, because her eyes were open and she was looking at me. She didn't jump, or scream, or laugh. She just moved her hand slowly down, moved her dress down over her nice long legs. Then she raised up and leaned on one elbow, watching me, and slowly buttoned up the blouse, like it wasn't very important.

She was almost twenty-seven, she had said, sadly once, but she looked younger and was really stacked for wolf-calls. The kind you keep looking at, walking down a street.

I kept thinking of Archie Graff and how he'd really give me the bird if he could see me now He'd told me I ought to move in and told me how to do it. "Just remember, pal. They're the ones that's scared. They like to be scared. They're like dogs. Once they see you're scared, you ain't got a chance."

I just stood there feeling like the world's worst jerk. All I could think of was that I was five foot ten and weighed only a hundred and ten pounds. I could feel the itching on my face, along the jaw where a rash kept breaking out. I kept thinking of Archie, him being only a few months older than me, not even seventeen yet, but looking like a man, and shaving three times regularly every week.

"Come in, Leo," Martha said, soft and easy like she didn't care that I'd been looking. She seemed to know how ashamed and mixed-up I was, and she had a nice soft smile.

I couldn't move. She just kept looking at me, and smiling a little, maybe a little sadly "Come on in, Leo. I was hoping you'd come up and keep me company again. I was lonesome."

My throat felt choking hot. I stumbled into the room and she sat up and took hold of my hand.

"Sit down," she said. But I couldn't move, and she stood up close to me, still holding my hand that way.

"I'm sorry, Leo," she said.

"Why be sorry?"

"I just didn't think, I mean about how you're feeling."

"It doesn't matter."

"Sure it does. I know how it matters."

"Thanks," I said. My face felt wet and itchy. I was burning up. "I like you so much, Martha. I do. I can talk to you. I never have been able to, and being here this week—"

"I like you a lot too, Leo. We've had such nice evenings talking and playing cards and everything. You've helped me a lot."

I wanted to put my face against her shoulder and cry. But all the time I could see her breasts under the thin blouse. She knew I was looking.

"It's all right," she said. "You ought to feel this way, you know that."

I couldn't say anything.

"It's all right," she said softly "It's normal enough. I'm just sorry I didn't think what it meant to you, that's all."

I moved my hand, and she took hold of it and pushed it gently away

"You said it was all right," I said.

She pushed my hand away again, and kept on holding it.

"I'm sorry, Leo."

"You said it was all right."

"It's right for you to feel this way But it would be wrong—with us, Leo. That wouldn't be right."

"Why, why, Martha? I want to so much. Please let me—I mean if it's right."

"Not with me. I'd like to, but I can't."

"Don't I have to start somewhere? Aren't we good friends? If it's all right, and we're good friends, then why not?"

"It just wouldn't be right, with us, this way "

"But I want to, Martha. I've got to. I can't do anything else, just thinking about it all the time. It just goes on the same all the time, waiting and nothing happening, nothing changing. It's got to change. You just can't wait and wait. I've got to, Martha."

My knees were too weak. I couldn't even stand up. I sat down on the bed and I could see her legs close to my face and I could feel her hands on my head, moving soft.

"I'd like to help you," she said. "But I can't."

I felt like I was going to fall into pieces, fly apart. "It's just because it's me."

"No, that isn't it at all."

"That's it. That's always going to be it." I tried to laugh.

"No it isn't. You're one of the nicest sweetest boys I've ever known. You've been so good for me here, Leo. Sometime I'll explain how you've been so good for me because you're nice."

"You got a regular guy, that's it."

"No, I don't have a regular guy, not any more," she whispered, and she rubbed the top of my head like I was a pet dog or something.

"You just want somebody older," I said. "Somebody with experience. If it's always that way, how does anybody ever—?"

"That's not nice. That isn't true at all, Leo."

"Yes it is. You figure I'm not old enough."

I couldn't look at her. I couldn't stay there and

torture myself. I ran out and I ran around the house. No air at all out there. You could hardly breathe it was that hot. The bees were just crawling with spread wings around on the flower stocks like they were about dead.

I went back into the living room and lay there. I wasn't even over at the pool much, not since Martha came to stay with us. All I could do was lie around thinking about this all the time. I'd look at the advertisements in the back of the magazines and think about Martha, but it didn't do any good any more.

Once she talked to me from the stairs. About Archie.

"Who is that fellow?" she asked.

"Archie Graff. He's from St. Joe. He's visiting his Uncle for a couple of weeks."

"Why?"

I put my arm over my eyes. What did I care? But why had Archie come to a place like Lakeville for two weeks, come to think of it. I didn't know. Archie said he hated the place. He said he was going nuts in it, that it was a strictly nowhere jump in the road. He couldn't hardly wait, he'd said, to get out of Lakeville.

"How should I know?"

"We're still friends, aren't we, Leo?"

"Sure, good friends."

"I don't like this fellow Archie. He doesn't belong here."

"That's his business I guess."

"I saw you with Archie out front yesterday. I don't much like him, and I don't think he'd be good for you, Leo. If you don't mind my saying so."

I didn't say anything. Treating me like a kid, same old stuff. I got it everywhere all the time. All I could think of was the way I felt about her.

She started back up the stairs. "Don't forget to lock the doors, Leo, will you?"

"Nope," I said.

She'd told me about locking up more than once every day since my folks went on their week's vacation. I couldn't figure what she was afraid of. Not in a lump in the road like Lakeville, where there are only stupid old people left because anybody with any brains or not too old have long since got out.

She didn't seem like the type that's scared of nothing. She had had some kind of trouble and she was a friend of a friend of my mother's and that was why she was there, just resting. My mother liked her, and was always waiting on her and feeling sorry for Martha. I didn't know why. Once I heard my mother whispering to my father, something about a nasty love-affair

"From what Gordon, down at the filling station, told me," my old man said like he couldn't afford to worry about it, "she's always been in trouble with guys. Attracts 'em like sugar does flies. Could be she's here just to be free of them."

In the evening after I had some salad which I couldn't eat, I went out and lay on the porch swing. It was getting dark. The June bugs started whamming into the screens. Lightning bugs signaled out along the road.

I remembered I'd forgot to lock the front door and I knew Martha would come down to make sure I'd locked it, so I locked it and lay back down in the porch swing and thought about the way she had looked lying up there on the bed. I started aching all over, even my teeth started aching, and it felt just like I was going crazy. I knew I was going crazy.

I heard Archie's footsteps and then he was looking and grinning down at me.

"Well, how'd you make out with the chicken?"

"So-so," I said. I didn't want to talk about it. But Archie did.

"That means you threw snake-eyes," he said.

"So what?"

"Don't be cute, pal. Jesus, I'm only trying to help you."

"Sure, but it wouldn't work."

"You got to make it work."

He sprawled out loose and easy the way he always did. He stretched out his long legs in the skin-tight jeans and clicked his thick-soled brass-studded shoes together. He wore a T-shirt with the sleeves rolled half way up over his shoulders. He had a thin waist and wide shoulders and he had long wavy black hair and a good looking face. But he grinned a little all the time, even when there wasn't anything funny, and his eyelids covered his eyes almost completely so you never could see how he was looking.

He took a bone-handled knife out of his pocket and swung it round and round on the end of the braided leather.

"I was hoping, but I didn't figure you'd make any time, Leo. The first time's the hardest for some guys."

He looked through the screen door. Upstairs in Martha's room a radio was playing something about walking with a memory down a lonesome street.

"What line did she pull on you, hickey?"

"Don't call me that."

"You let the hickeys bother you, that's bad. The hell with them, pal. Bet you was thinking about them instead of how to move in with her."

"Ah, forget her, Archie. I don't care."

"Sure you do. What line did you use?"

"She just didn't want to."

"Maybe some of them don't; most of them do. I got a good look at this chicken and she's got the look, pal. I've seen it. I can spot it a mile away. That's what I told you. She's keeping it under wraps. I know that type. Open them up and they go crazy"

With Archie, it was like everything else with me.

One minute I'd hate him; the next it seemed like he could make things happen. I'd walk around with Archie and I'd get to thinking I looked the way he did, and after he was gone I'd hate him.

"What did that chicken say?"

"Ah, I don't remember."

"Come on, pal, what did the chicken say up there? I want to know. Jesus, I'm in on this thing, ain't I?"

"I just asked and—"

"You don't ask. That shows you're scared."

"She's too old, I guess that's it. Look, Archie, she's almost thirty I mean she could be our mother "

Archie stood up and rubbed his hand down his thigh and left a streak of sweat. He looked up toward Martha's room.

"They don't want to be asked, pal. Just invaded."

He grabbed hold of the screen door knob. He jiggled the door.

"What gives here?"

"It's locked. She don't want anybody coming in at nights."

"That's what she says. Give me the key "

"Archie—let's go swimming. It's too hot—"

"Give me the key."

He took the key from me and unlocked the door and went in. "You want to see how it's done, hickey?" he said.

If it hadn't been for Martha, I guess I wouldn't ever have met up with Archie Graff. He lived clear on the other side of town with this Uncle Lindstrom that nobody knew much about. This Lindstrom didn't mix much with anybody And Archie never went any place in Lakeville, and I'd never have seen him unless he'd seen Martha walk into our house. That's how I met Archie. He came up and asked me who she was, and I told him all I knew which wasn't much. Something about him scared me a little, but he got to talking about women and I didn't want him to leave town after that.

But there was a lot about her I hadn't told Archie, because I knew it wasn't going to interest him very much. Like the way Martha and I had those long talks about life in the evenings, and how we played cards and dominoes, and how nice she was and how she understood things.

I couldn't hardly breathe as I followed Archie down the hall. He looked in the door. She had the door open because it was so hot and there was a little breeze come up because it was late at night.

She had on a thin white dressing gown of some kind and she was standing in front of the bureau combing her hair She had long black hair and it came down almost to her waist. She turned slowly I knew that was all she was wearing, just that thin silk looking dressing gown.

Archie went in and sprawled out in the rocking chair and grinned up at Martha.

"Can we come in?" Archie said.

She looked at me real quick, a real sad look, but it was sort of mad too, and then she looked at Archie. He had the knife out again, twirling it around.

"This is Archie," I said.

"Your friend Archie," she said. She just whispered it, and it had a nervous sound.

"We thought you might want some company," I said.

"Looks like I've got company whether I want it or not," Martha said. She turned and started combing her hair again. The hand holding the comb was white. She was standing real stiff. Her face in the mirror had a funny look.

I wanted to go. But I was afraid Archie wouldn't. And at the same time I didn't want to go. I had the burning in my throat, a tight aching feeling all over

"Well," Archie said, "and I thought this was a hot night."

"Sure it is," I said.

"You mean you don't feel the chill in here, pal?"

"Don't you kids have a scout meeting somewhere?" Martha said.

Archie stood up. She stopped combing her hair. I could see both their faces side by side in the mirror, sort of blurred. It looked like an old picture of some kind, I thought.

"If three's a crowd, maybe my pal, Leo, can take a walk," Archie said.

"Oh no, no," she said quickly She turned around and gave a nervous laugh. "You stay, Leo. I like lots of company "

"Sure," Archie said, "stay We can play cards. Strip poker " He reached his hand out. "You could only lose once, honey "

She was leaning with stiff arms back against the bureau. Her face was white and then a red flush came up into her neck, then into her cheeks.

"You like to dance?" Archie asked. "Dancing is more fun than playing cards."

He moved closer to her; he was almost up against her then. She didn't say anything. Her mouth was curled up on one side in a funny way.

It seemed a long time with no one saying anything, and with just the sound of breathing. And all the time they were standing there close together just looking at one another. Something was happening, but I didn't know what it was.

She seemed to be hating him, but I knew she was afraid of him and that there was something else. Maybe it was something like the way I felt about Archie. Maybe it was something like the way I've seen a bird look at a snake.

Anyway, it didn't faze Archie. He stood there grinning, outstaring her I just sat there. It seemed to get hotter I kept remembering that Archie was just about the same age as I was and how he'd said it didn't mean anything.

Archie slid the knife at his pocket, but it didn't

go into his pocket, fell down to the end of the braided leather and spun there.

"You want to dance?" Archie asked again. "We ought to start riding high, honey I'll be pulling out in a few days. You can starve, honey, in this burg."

"Get out of here," she whispered. *"Get out."*

"Who you kidding, honey?"

"Leo," she said. I could barely hear her "Leo—"

Something got me up. I started to take hold of Archie's arm, but I felt like I'd felt once with a high fever. I felt dizzy like I might fall down.

"Come on, honey," Archie said.

Archie caught her hand and jerked her around and pulled her up tight against him and bent her over backwards a little. One of her arms came up and grabbed at his neck like she was afraid of falling on her back. He started wiggling his hips and sliding his feet in slow shuffling movements and turning her round and round.

Archie slowed up a little to switch off the overhead light in the bronze chandelier. The small lamp over by the radio was still on, and Archie and Martha went round and round in a shadow.

I was sweating and itching and going for the door, but I didn't want to leave.

She was moving stiff, her head twisted away to the side. I thought I heard a little sound, like a moan, come out of her, but I wasn't sure. I could see the muscles rigid in Archie's back and how his arms were corded. Then he was kissing her. She was trying to keep him from doing that and then all at once she seemed to go all limp and loose and her head fell back a little and her eyes were closed and she moaned and shivered a little, and it sounded like pain only it wasn't exactly pain either

Streaks of sweat ran down under Archie's T-shirt as he kept on kissing her.

"Please," I heard her say. "Oh, God, help me . . ."

Archie said, "Who you kidding?"

I was out in the hall and the door was shut. I felt the way I felt once when I held my breath too long the first time I tried swimming under water It was like something was squeezing my head. My throat felt so tight I thought maybe I couldn't breathe, and I got scared. I wanted to run. I got half-way down the stairs, then went back to the door.

I could hear noises in there. I could hardly breathe. I heard that same moaning sort of sound, and other noises. Once I heard Archie laugh. I tried to run again. Half way down the stairs, I thought I heard a crashing sound, thought maybe it was the lamp falling, or a glass or something because it sounded like glass breaking.

I started down the hall and the door opened. Archie came out. He leaned against the wall, only with his face to the wall, bending over a little.

"It's all yours now, hickey," he said.

Enough light came from the hall so that I could see Martha lying on the bed. But, in the shadowy light, I could just see her. She was all naked, I knew that much.

Archie wasn't any better than I was. She didn't even like Archie. She had said I was the nicest and sweetest fellow she'd ever met.

I was on the bed and I could touch her all over, and she didn't care. She didn't care. Now it was all right. I could do anything . . .

Way off somewhere I heard a dog bark and I got up, switched on the light. It was just as if she was sleeping except that her throat was turning blue. And when I touched her head it moved crazily, unhooked, to the side.

When I ran into the hall Archie was heading for the stairs, he was bent over, and had his arms folded across his stomach. He missed the first step and I saw him rolling down, his shoes thumping down the railing posts.

When I got down there, out in the front yard on the cool grass, Archie was sprawled out loose on his back looking straight up. I could see the bone handle of the knife sticking out of him, and the end of the leather braid torn loose.

I saw a car go by and turn in at the Norton's house. And I heard some laughter, you know the way it carries on a summer's night, and a dog barking. I could see the light up there in Martha's window, could imagine her brushing her hair. The light from the living room came across the porch and a line of it was laying over the grass.

In my mind, I heard Martha calling from the window up there.

"Did you lock the doors, Leo?"

"Yeah, sure I did."

"You won't forget now, will you, Leo?"

"Nope."

Nothing to be afraid of, not to an attractive woman in a lump in the road like Lakeville.

I started back toward the porch, in a kind of daze. Out of habit, I started locking the front door.

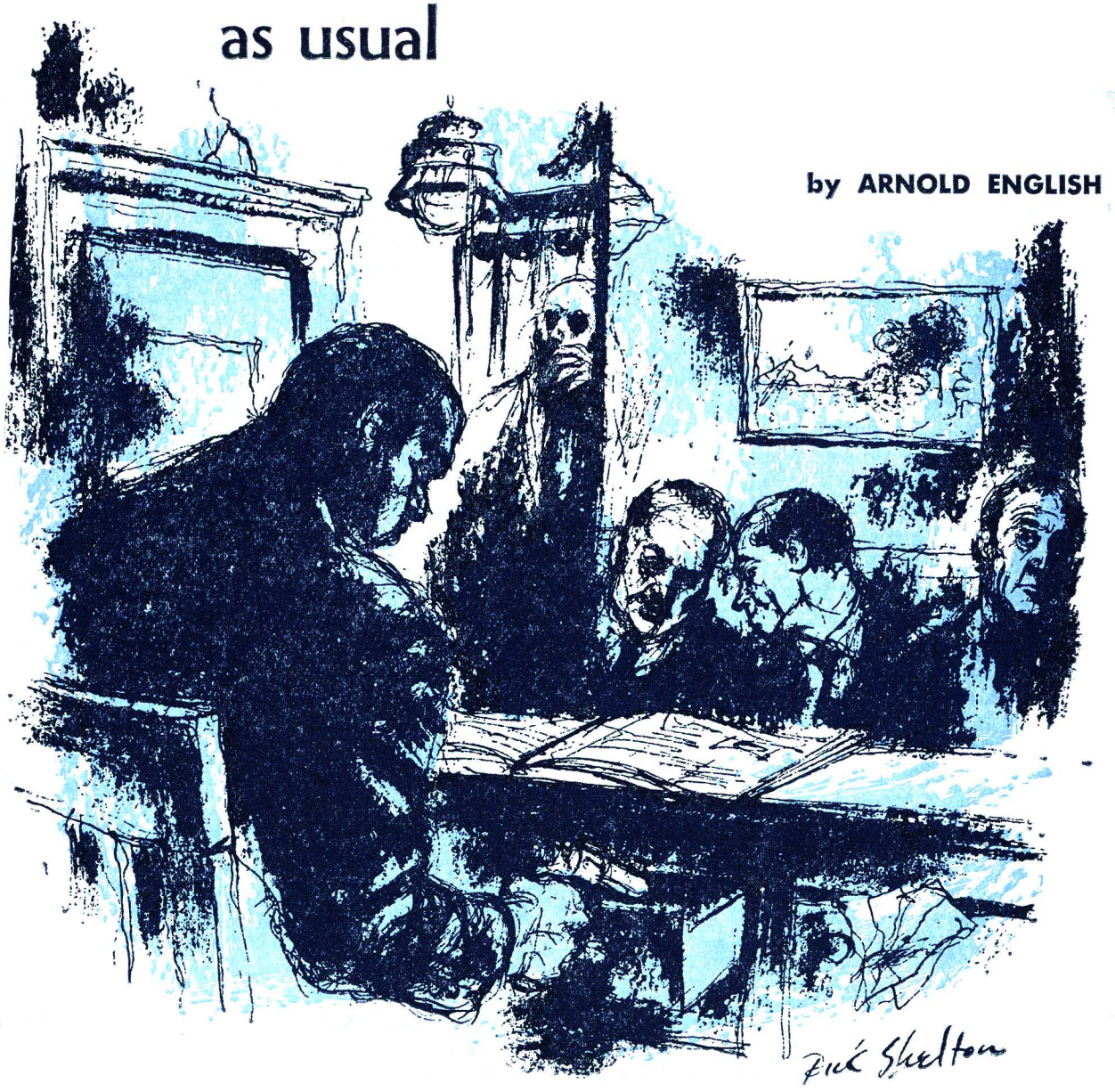
Whoa, There!

In Montgomery, Ala., a traffic officer arrested W G. Sterns when he stopped for a traffic light. The charge: driving while intoxicated. The light was showing green.

business as usual

Lucille was upstairs, and she was safe there. Then the killer started up the stairs . . .

by ARNOLD ENGLISH



CARR SAT BACK of the counter Underneath it, at about the height of his bellybutton, was the cash drawer. On a shelf next to it stood the .32 and the night edition of the tabloid which he hadn't yet looked over

He looked out at the seven men sitting in the parlor. One of them, an old guy, picked his nose. A couple of others talked in low voices.

"When I get up there . . ."

And a look up the carpeted stairs to the five doors that were closed at the moment.

Soft music was piped in from a long-play phonograph in a nearby cubbyhole. A magazine rack held current issues of picture magazines.

A couple of teen-agers talked, looked up at Carr, then subsided. They were irritable. One of them looked longingly toward the exit, but didn't move.

Carr covered his mouth with a hand and smiled broadly There was no work for him to do. He reached under the counter for the tabloid and glanced at the front page.

He frowned, then began to read intently. When he was finished, he ducked down for a telephone and brought it up; the phone was kept on the lowest shelf and seldom used because the sight of it made customers nervous.

As quietly as he could, a hand circling his lips to muffle the words, he asked for Captain Whitehill.

"Captain? This is Julius Carr. I was hoping that you might send a couple of your boys around to see me. Soon as possible."

The police captain began, "What do you want?"

"I'll tell your boys when I see them." He saw out of the corner of an eye that his very furtiveness had aroused some curiosity in the room. Putting down one hand, he forced himself to speak heartily, easily. "Soon as possible, like I say."

Whitehill sent a man around once a month with a little black bag, always on the same day, probably the same split second. Carr had met the captain once, a fumbling guy impressed with his own importance.

"See what I can do."

Whitehill hung up. For a full minute Carr held the receiver in hand, looking down at it, biting his lip so hard that his eyes watered.

Automatically he looked up when one of the teenagers rose and sidled up to him.

"I suppose," the kid said slowly, "you're what they call a pim- . "

"A cashier," Carr said mildly. "Do the bookkeeping and all that."

The boy was jittery, looking toward the exit as he stood there and playing with his high school ring.

Carr's attention came swiftly back to business. He folded the paper, aligned the edges by softly slapping them one at a time against the counter.

The boy asked, "How did you ever . . . ?"

"Get into this business?" Carr finished. He sighed. "Here's a friendly tip: don't ask the girls that question. Practically everybody does and it bores 'em."

He was used to first-timers who were curious and jumpy, as if they were soiling their hands as soon as they stepped into the place.

At a loss for something else to say, the boy glanced down at the tabloid's front page. "Escaped convict, huh? What do they break out for, those convicts? They know they'll be caught and sent back."

"Maybe they don't care." Carr's eyes rested briefly on the .32. Still keeping it under the counter he leaned forward and hefted it, then put it back. "This one here in the papers, this Henry Decker, I don't think he cares a bit. All he wants . . ."

Carr stopped abruptly, coughing into his handkerchief. His forehead was misted with sweat.

On the upper level, a door opened. A man stepped out, walked down the stairs, then looked around a little belligerently at the men who were waiting, and walked out very quickly The teen boys stared, moistening their lips.

The girl who was free now stood on the upper level, looking down at Carr first, the way she usually did, then smiling out to the men. Carr winked at her, unlike his behavior with any of the other girls, and looked down to make sure that her slightly stubby legs were in shadow.

Her red hair glinted in the hall light. Skin smooth and even. Body surrounded by businesslike blue dress with ruffles at the wrists. Breasts, very full, rising and falling smoothly.

Carr held up a hand for her attention. "Something I have to tell you. Be right up."

He smiled widely, bent over to drop the gun into a pocket, then locked the cash drawer Routine. Still smiling widely, even whistling, he walked up to where Lucille waited.

With a thumb outstretched, he signalled her into the room. Her brows rose, but she stepped inside.

Her room was small and, on the whole, neat. Two rows of comic books were stacked neatly on the night table, and above them a box of chocolates. The bed had been made, pillows fluffed up. A grease stain of a man's hair on one of the pillows caught his eye. He stared at Lucille, whose eyes had briefly followed his. She shrugged, then reversed the pillow.

"Don't be so careless next time," he said gruffly. "I came up here to give you some news. You're not going to like it."

"Give."

"It's about Henry Decker."

"He's up at State Pen." She took a chair and crossed her legs. "Been there six-eight months."

"Time enough to shoot the wad of dough you got for going to the cops," he said. "That part about the dough isn't what's important now."

Lucille had gone to the cops with information about a robbery. She'd heard it from one of her customers, Henry Decker, when Decker had been howling drunk.

She looked up. "You know it's gone."

The two of them had spent it together. Carr was fond of Lucille. They often stepped out for a weekday afternoon in each other's company. There had never been anything else between them, mainly because it would have seemed vulgar to Carr.

"Henry Decker swore he'd kill you."

"Why worry now?" She rubbed her hair with the back of a hand. "He's tucked away "

"He broke jail this afternoon. It's in the papers."

She didn't throw a tantrum. She gripped a knee tightly with her fingers before looking up intently.

"What does that make me?"

"Number one target, in my book."

She nodded. "You think he'll come here?"

"Stands to reason."

"He'll kill me if he does." The ghost of a laugh played across her features. "Make a hell of a stink around here, Julie. Maybe close down the place."

He growled, "Nothing funny about that."

Lucille teased, "What's more important to you, me or the place?"

Carr cleared his throat. "I phoned Whitehill. Asked him to send some of his men. Probably he thinks it's a tea party because I had to play it light, downstairs. Don't want to disturb the customers."

She said anxiously, "They'll be here?"

"Sure, kid." He put out a hand to touch hers; there was seldom much more physical contact between them. "You can skip for the night, if you want."

Lucille ran both hands down the side of her dress, then stepped over to a closet door. Upon opening it showed a full-length mirror. Carr watched as she smiled at herself, then put out a hand and looked down at it.

"Guess I'm not too shaky" Lucille turned and kicked shut the closet door with a heel; Carr couldn't resist glancing down to see if a scratch had been made. "How many rubes downstairs?"

"Seven. Keep us all busy for awhile."

Lucille said something obscene. Carr paused in front of the closed door By the time he opened it, he was smiling. He walked to the landing, then turned his head back.

"Don't forget to take care of that for me," he said loudly.

"I won't, honey."

Lucille stood in front of her door, calm, relaxed, smiling.

Carr looked over the crowd, noting two more men. He settled the point of which of them had come in first, then turned to the others. The automatic smile was firm on his lips, the friendliness in his tone.

"Who's next?" he asked. "Who visits the little lady?"

The old man, who'd been picking his nose, suddenly sat up, stiffened and said, "My turn." And looking up, he grinned at Lucille, "Get the bed warm for me."

The old man counted five dollars out of an old-fashioned change purse. Carr put the money in the cash drawer, annoyed that the old man had given twenty pennies.

The old man walked up the stairs slowly and linked arms with Lucille, then stepped into the room. From below, the teen age boys watched every step.

They exchanged glances. One of them riffled through the magazines on the rack before joining the other at the counter.

"We've been thinking," the first one began.

Carr was grateful for the interruption. He'd been unable to read the paper or keep his eyes from the exit door.

"I sure hope you men aren't here to browse." He raised his voice; a hoarse chuckle drifted back to him.

The boys flushed.

"Nothing to be scared about, men. The girls you pick are sure to treat you right. What kind do you want, blonde, brunette, redhead?"

The boys said nothing. Carr allowed himself to thump the counter by way of helping make the point.

"Wait till you two see Mary Ann. Only seventeen, but hot as they come." He made gestures with his wrist. "You know the way kids are."

One of the boys stiffened. "Yeah. Yeah, sure."

They settled down at adjoining chairs. Carr watched craftily for a few minutes, then took to hammering his fingers against the counter. He bent down for the telephone, then shook his head and left it.

The door opened heavily. Leaden footsteps pounded inside. Carr looked up, and suddenly gripped one edge of the counter to support himself.

"Remember me?"

Decker talked grimly. His shoulders threatened to burst out of the badly fitting suit. No one else paid much attention. Somebody turned a magazine page clumsily, ripping it down the middle.

"Pretty well."

"You know who I want."

Carr's tongue darted out, already rubbed raw and bumpy as sandpaper.

"I know. She's busy right now."

"Too bad!"

"It won't be long." He leaned over the counter and whispered, "Give me a break, will you? Don't scare the pigeons."

His hand shot out to the .32 in place beside the cash drawer The touch of it always set his teeth on edge. The times when he had to check it, to see if it was loaded and in good order, always depressed him.

Decker rubbed his bald head, then scratched his thick eyebrows with a thumbnail. "How long do I wait?"

"Not more'n ten minutes. Maybe even five."

"Okay," Decker nodded. "I'll be a good boy"

He settled himself noisily in one of the wooden chairs.

Carr felt the man's eyes on him, and he sat back and looked up at the ceiling. He was a little more comfortable. If Decker was willing to give him no trouble, maybe he only intended to rough up Lucille, no more. Even so, it would be a noisy business.

He was grateful when the long-play record finished and he ducked into the little cubbyhole to change records. All the music was quiet, languorous. The staff's biggest problem, even with customers known for years, was always to put them in a more relaxed frame of mind.

When he returned, he carried pencil and paper. He set himself to estimating the night's take.

Decker stirred. "Three minutes. That's all she's got before I go up there. I been sitting here for seven minutes. I been waiting a lot longer, if you know what I mean."

The other men nudged each other and looked nastily at Decker.

"Won't be long," Carr smiled.

A door opened upstairs, that of another girl. One of the teen-agers paid and walked haltingly up the

stairs. At every step he looked down below to where his friend sat. One of the men called out something raucous. The girl flounced to the top of the stairs, took the boy's arm in her hand, and talked soothingly.

When the door finally closed the boy left below suddenly glared at the men on all sides of him, then settled to looking up at the door through which his friend had gone.

Carr bit his nails and swore continually under his breath.

Decker sat cracking his knuckles and tapping the floor with frayed heels.

Business was brisk. New customers came, the doors above opened and closed.

Carr looked up grimly when Lucille's door finally opened. The old man, her customer, stepped out first. He threw back some cheerful words. Lucille's voice, from inside, gave an answer.

At the sound, Decker stood quickly and started up the stairs.

One of the men, noticing Decker's advance, said querulously, "What's the idea? He's out of turn."

"A previous date," Carr said glibly. "Lucille's his favorite."

Decker closed the door after himself. If there was any sound out of Lucille, it didn't carry down.

Carr managed to drop the .32 into a pocket without anybody seeing. He had to stop to lock the cash drawer and take the key—that was normal procedure when he stepped away from the counter. He had almost forgotten it, last time.

Turning to one of the old customers, he said as cheerfully as he could, "Hold the fort for me, will you, Tony?"

"Sure, for ten per cent of the night's take."

"Be right down."

The stairs creaked under him. Bannisters were warm with the heat from dozens of palms.

As he stopped short at the door, it opened on him. Lucille was wearing a coat, and a little hat. Decker, his face as impressive as before, kept a hard hand on hers.

"We're going out," Decker said grimly. "Some things to take care of. Hope you don't mind."

Carr didn't look at Lucille. She whispered, "He's going to kill me. He brags about it."

"If you sing out," Decker said grimly, "it'll be done in a second—I don't care who the witnesses are or how many. This way, Lu, if you shut up maybe you'll live another ten minutes."

Carr saw Decker's arm stiffen against Lucille's body, propping her up.

"And we don't none of us want no trouble in the place," Decker said. "Right? Come on, Lu."

Carr heard Lucille being pushed ahead of the man and down the stairs. He faced the door which swung open on the shabby little room. His hands curled around the trigger of the gun in his pocket, but he didn't move.

He was supposed to prevent trouble in the house, *nothing more*. If he tried to hold back a man leaving peacefully, he'd be *causing* trouble.

Carr saw the customers looking resentful at sight of Decker leaving with Lucille, but he didn't actually see Lucille going. He turned and walked down heavily, hand hard against the bannister.

He was at the counter when Captain Whitehill's men finally arrived. He sent them away. For a while he looked up at the opened door above, then made a notation, *Girl.*

The new one, the next girl, might not be a tenth as nice as Lu. He'd liked Lu a lot.

Of all the luck!

Deadly Donation

Detroit police are attempting to trace the donor of a submachine gun. The weapon was found among articles collected by the Volunteers of America, a charity organization.

Derelict In Duty

Two Portland, Ore., officers returned to their patrol car to find a man tampering with the ignition. Seated beside the man, calmly watching, was "Tiger," a police dog the officers had left to guard the car.

Long Shot

A prisoner in Alcatraz Federal prison, with 15 years to serve for burglary, recently announced he was going to sue the government for injuries received in a bus accident while he was being brought to the prison. He said the injuries would seriously hamper his "future career as a dancing star on television."

Say it with Flowers

A John J. Malone Novelette

by CRAIG RICE

The client was perfect: she was blonde, beautiful and rich. So Malone told her that he wasn't interested...

"You WOULDN'T REFUSE to help poor little me?" the beautiful blonde said. She leaned over the desk and fluttered her eyelashes at John J Malone.

Malone sighed and looked away He gazed, apparently fascinated, at the row of filing cabinets that lined one wall of his office. Turning his head slightly, he stared with the same fixity of expression at the tiny shelf which Maggie had put up against the adjoining wall. It held a small potted plant which was beginning to overflow its pot and creep down the dingy wall, a miniature brass teapot and a particularly repulsive porcelain rabbit. "Cheer up the place," Malone muttered to his cigar "Add a little atmosphere." He sighed again, bitterly this time.

"What?" said the beautiful blonde.

Malone waved negligently at the shelf. "What do you think of it?" he asked. "Do you think it adds a cheery atmosphere?"

The blonde stared for a second. "I think it's horrible," she said decisively "But, listen, Malone, I didn't come here to talk about decorations. I want you to—"

"I know," Malone said. "You told me. Your uncle Jasper McIlhenny—"

"Jabez," the blonde murmured.

"It doesn't matter," Malone said grandly. "Your uncle has disappeared, and you want me to find him."

"Yes, Malone," the girl said. "And you will do it, won't you? For me, Malone?" She batted her eyelashes again. Malone turned resolutely away and tried to think of something else.

"I don't need money," he said at last, expansively. "I'm on my way to Havana. Havana, Cuba," he added, in case there had been a misunderstanding. "And, besides, what can I do that the police force of Chicago can't do better?" He hoped that Miss McIlhenny didn't know the answer to that one.

"It's been two weeks, Malone," she said. "I went to the Missing Persons Bureau and they say they're working on it, but two weeks is a long time. I've heard about you, and I just know you can find Uncle Jabez, if anyone can."

"The fact remains," Malone began, and wondered what else he had been going to say. "The fact remains. And moreover, I am on my way to Havana, Cuba. If I see your uncle there I'll give him a message from you. I can't be fairer than that, can I?"

"Malone," the girl said, "you are heartless. Absolutely heartless." She stepped back to give the rumpled little lawyer the full benefit of her gaze. It was a gaze that spelled murder, Malone thought. It spelled several other things, too. Reluctantly, Malone removed his mind from the brink of temptation.

"Miss McIlhenny," he began, in what he hoped was a fatherly tone, "I'm sure that—if you have a little patience—the police will be able to find your uncle. I really couldn't do a thing except send you bills. Exorbitant bills."

"Money doesn't matter," the girl said. "We have plenty of money." She dug into a black leather handbag and produced a sheaf of bills. She removed three of them and placed them carefully on Malone's brown desk. "Will that do for a retainer?"

Malone stared at the three one-hundred-dollar bills. "It would be fine," he said sadly "But I have tickets. My boat leaves on Friday. This is Thursday morning—early Thursday morning," he amended. "I just can't do a thing. I'm very sorry."

"Ha," the girl said. She picked up the money with one sweeping motion, and went to the door. She opened it, turned and said: "Heartless. Absolutely heartless." She banged the door behind her and went out.

Malone sat behind his desk. Missing Persons would turn up Uncle Jabez, he told himself. So, it was obvious that there was no use in thinking about the blonde Miss McIlhenny any more. He might as well pretend she had never existed. Instead, he could think about the poker game, the wonderful poker game to which Judge Touralchuck had invited him the night before. The game had given him enough money to buy tickets for a Havana cruise, and assure himself of a couple of weeks of fairly riotous living—and no girl was going to take all that away from him, even if she was beautiful, and seemed so lost, and murmured at him.

Perhaps thinking about the poker game wasn't such a good idea. He would stare at the shelf. The porcelain rabbit stared back unwinkingly. That was one good thing about the shelf, Malone thought vaguely; it gave a person something to think about when times were rough. Just because a beautiful blonde came to your office early Thursday morning and begged you to help her, that didn't mean . . .

Malone sighed.

I am going to forget all about her, he told himself firmly. "She wasn't even here," he said, and listened to his voice echoing in the room. It had a very satisfactory sound, a firm, no-nonsense tone to it that appealed to him.

"She wasn't even here," he said again. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I defy you to prove that my client ever knew this woman. I defy you to prove that she ever came to his office."

The office door opened and Malone looked up guiltily. But the girl standing on his threshold was raven-haired and petite. "Now, Malone," she said. "What are you practicing for? You should take it easy You're going to Havana for a nice rest."

"That's exactly where I'm going, Maggie," John J. Malone said in his firmest voice. "And not even all the blondes in Chicago—not even all the blondes in the United States—" he added recklessly—"are going to stop me."

2.

"So you're leaving for Havana," Joe the Angel said, a little while later. He put a double rye in front of the little lawyer.

Malone looked around the musty precincts of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar. Only the City Hall janitor inhabited the room, and he sat silently at the other end of the bar, nursing his beer. Malone picked up his glass and looked at it reflectively.

"Havana, Cuba," he said. "And when I'm nice and warm there, just lying on the beach with nothing to do, I'll think of you, Joe. By the way," he added anxiously, "do I owe you anything?"

"Just a couple of bucks on the bill, Malone," Joe the Angel said. "It'll keep until you get back."

"I'll pay you now," Malone said. He dug into his pocket and fished out a collection of crumpled bills. Carefully unwrapping two of them, he laid them on the bar "Now we're all square," he said. He looked around the empty room. "This deserves a celebration."

Joe the Angel hesitated only a second. "Have one on the house, Malone," he said grandly Malone downed his first drink and Joe poured again. "We're going to miss you around here," he said.

"I'm not going to miss Chicago," Malone announced. "People always coming to you with problems they won't let you not solve or " He considered for a minute and drank deeply "Anyhow, I won't miss it. It's all water under a burning bridge. Or walking on water before you come to it."

"Sure, Malone," Joe the Angel said sadly

"Listen," Malone went on, "when I get to Havana, the first thing I'm going to do . . "

The telephone rang. In a dark corner of the bar the parrot screamed "Ring! Ring!"

"Excuse me, Malone," Joe the Angel said. He went to the telephone, turned and scowled fiercely at the bar parrot. It shut its beak and looked at Malone disapprovingly Malone stared back belligerently.

"Okay," Joe the Angel was saying. "Yes, sure he's here. You just wait a minute, he'll talk to you." He cupped the receiver against his chest and shouted: "Malone!"

"I'm not here," Malone said without taking his eyes off the parrot. "I went home hours ago."

"It's Captain Von Flanagan," Joe the Angel said. "He sounds pretty mad."

Malone almost said: "I don't care how mad he sounds." He reconsidered just in time. After all, Von Flanagan was an old friend.

"Hello?" he said tentatively.

A torrent of profane abuse scorched his ear. Malone held the receiver a little away from him and heard Von Flanagan's voice screaming: " Just because you're too busy to help, I've got to talk to the Commissioner! He wants to see me now, and what am I going to tell him, Malone? This is what I get for helping you all these years . "

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "Wait a minute. Suppose you tell me what you're talking about?"

"Don't pretend you don't know," Von Flanagan said. "Don't play innocent with me this time. I've got you dead to rights and you're going to wish you'd never been born. The next parking ticket you come to me with . ."

"Von Flanagan." Malone's reasonable tone seemed to enrage the police officer even further, but after another shriek or two he subsided, muttering. "Now," Malone said, "what are you talking about? What did I do to you?"

"McIlhenny," Von Flanagan moaned. "The Commissioner's own niece by marriage."

A horrible light began to dawn on Malone. "You mean that blonde," he said.

"That blonde. She can't find her uncle, and we're working on it. Malone, you know we're working on it." Von Flanagan's voice was breaking.

"Of course you are," Malone said. "That's what I told her."

"But she wants a report every five minutes," Von Flanagan said. "I can't do any work with her bothering me every time I turn around. Malone, I swear to you, I suggested your name in all innocence. Not that you could do anything we can't . . ."

Malone thought of a number of things, and said none of them.

". . but she'll pay you for being bothered, and then she'll come to you and we can get some work done."

"Why not just tell her you're working?" Malone suggested. "I've seen you brush people off before."

"Malone," Von Flanagan sobbed. *"The Commissioner's niece by marriage."*

"Oh," the lawyer said. "I see."

"And then you refuse to help her You tell her you're going away, some wild story like that. Malone, I swear to you, the next time there's an unsolved murder in Chicago, I'm going to pin it on you. I'm going to fake evidence if I have to, and bribe witnesses. I don't care. When you refuse to help an old friend . . ."

Malone thought quickly. On the one hand, he *was* going away, where Von Flanagan couldn't reach him. On the other hand, he might want to come back some day, even if he couldn't imagine why And Von Flanagan was an old friend, after all, regardless of how he treated Malone.

And besides, his boat didn't leave until Friday, and it was only Thursday afternoon. That left almost one whole day.

"All right, Von Flanagan," Malone said. "But this is the last time . ."

The voice on the other end became silk-smooth. "Anything you want, Malone. Just ask me."

"Don't worry," the little lawyer said. "I will."

3.

Malone went back to his office, humming *St. James Infirmary* under his breath. He got Maggie busy finding a Miss McIlhenny in the telephone book, relaxed, lit a fresh cigar, and thought about the situation.

There wasn't much to think about, he discovered. He had reached the point of deciding to look for Jabez McIlhenny in Havana, where any man with enough money and a little common sense would prefer to be found, when Maggie announced that a Miss McIlhenny was on the line.

Malone picked up the receiver and said in his most official tones: "This is Malone."

"I hoped you'd call," said the sultry voice he remembered. "You will look for Uncle Jabez, won't you? And I'm sure you'll do ever so much better than those old police . ."

"I'll take your case," Malone said sternly "The re-

tainer will be . . ah . . ." He paused for thought.

"If three hundred isn't enough," the voice said, "we'll make it five. You darling man, you!"

A little had been attractive, Malone decided, listening to the cooing of his new client, but too much was definitely enough. He wondered briefly exactly what he'd meant by that, decided to forget it, and said instead:

"Five hundred will be fine. But I'll have to talk to you . . "

"Clues," said the voice. "I'll be down right away"

There was a dull click. Malone held the receiver in his hand, shrugged, and went back to puffing at his cigar

He put in fifteen minutes staring at the china rabbit on his new shelf before Maggie entered. "A Miss McIlhenny to see you, Mr. Malone," she said.

"Can't you see I'm busy with these papers?" Malone growled. He grabbed a few papers from his desk and rustled them, convincingly, he hoped. "Oh, all right," he said, "send her in."

The beautiful blonde swayed in and sat, without invitation, on the chair next to Malone's desk.

"I had to make a check," she said. "I hope you don't mind." She put a folded piece of paper on the desktop. Malone did not pick it up.

"I'll have to ask you a lot of questions," he said.

"All right," she said.

"You may not like some of them."

"If they'll help you find Uncle Jabez . . ." She blinked back a sob. "I don't mind." She looked like a brave little girl. Malone refrained from patting her hand, and wondered just how much of her was play-acting. All of her, he decided savagely.

"Did your uncle have any enemies, that you know of?" he said after a second.

Miss McIlhenny thought. "Everybody liked Uncle Jabez. He was such a sweet old man."

"Was?" Malone said.

"I mean . well, he still is, I suppose."

"He might be dead," Malone pointed out, and watched the blonde's face for a reaction.

Her expression didn't change. She took a handkerchief from her black handbag and held it near her eyes without using it. Then she put it down on the desk. "If he's dead, I'd like to know about it," she said. "The police can't find out anything "

"I know," Malone said. "You told me. They're doing the best they can."

He thought for a minute and went on:

"When did you see him last?"

"He was just leaving the house, early Tuesday morning. Two weeks and two days ago. He lives in the big McIlhenny—well, I suppose you'd call it a mansion—near the Drive. I live with him."

"Anyone else in the house?" Malone asked. He remembered the place: a turreted pile of stone with Gothic windows and a general air of crumbling decay It sat alone near the Lakefront, brooding out on the water. The place had always given Malone cold shivers. He didn't like the idea of going there.

"Only the servants," the blonde said. "And when he left the house I asked . ."

"Servants," Malone said. "Who are they?"

"Oh, a man named Paul Finn," the blonde said. Servants, Malone imagined, were beneath her dignity One never mentioned servants. "He's Uncle's secretary. And my maid Rose. Rose Billington."

"Were they both in the house?"

"When Uncle left? Oh, no. Tuesday is their day off. I suppose they were out somewhere—smooching."

Malone tried to remember the last time he'd heard that word, and failed. He marked the fact down in his mind. The male secretary and the maid were having a romance. It sounded important. The lawyer didn't know why, and he told himself he might just as well be wrong.

"What did you say?" he asked, discovering that the blonde had gone right on with her paragraph.

She looked a little startled. "I said that I was all alone. I asked Uncle where he was going, and he said he had to see someone on business."

"What kind of business?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just didn't think about it at the time—you know the way a sentence just doesn't register on your mind—but when the police asked me I realized how strange it was. Uncle inherited a great deal of money, and it's been invested in very safe bonds. There's really—no business at all he'd have to attend to."

"He didn't say anything else?" Malone asked.

"He walked down to the corner and I went back in the house."

"Walked?"

"Uncle liked to walk," the blonde said. "He said it was good exercise for him."

"Where did he usually go when he went for a walk?" Malone asked.

The blonde thought. "Sometimes he went down to Eve's," she said. "And then there was Martine. Oh, yes, Martine."

The little lawyer began to feel confused. The conversation seemed to be traveling in a fog. "Eve and Martine," he said. "Girls he knew?"

"Well," the blonde said, "Martine was, anyhow. A girl. A—chorine? But he certainly wouldn't go to see her on *business*. Oh, goodness, no."

"I see," Malone said.

"Eve—that's Eve Washington—you've heard of her."

Malone considered. "No," he said at last.

The blonde shook her head. "Chicago's best-known ceramicist," she said, "and you say you've never heard . ."

"Miss McIlhenny," Malone said softly. "I'm a lawyer and I spend a lot of time in court. Some-

times I don't read the science page in the newspaper. You're going to have to tell me what a ceramicist is."

"Really," the blonde said. "Now you're just fooling little old me."

"No," Malone said.

"Oh." The blonde appeared to consider carefully, and Malone hoped for some reason that she wouldn't take the folded check from the desk, put it in her bag and leave. He would feel insulted. It wasn't a criminal offense not to know what a ceramicist was, he thought. He couldn't help it if he didn't know everything.

"Clay," the girl said. "She makes clay objects."

"Like mud pies," Malone said thoughtfully.

"More or—less," said the girl slowly. "She's very well-known and very expensive." She turned her head and seemed, for the first time, to catch sight of the brooding porcelain rabbit. "She might have made that," she said. "Though she wouldn't, of course?"

"Doesn't like rabbits?" Malone suggested.

"It's too cheap, mass-produced. Not at all her type of thing."

"But," said Malone delicately, "Jabez McIlhenny was her type of thing?"

"Not the way you're thinking," the girl said. "Uncle Jabez likes clay sculpture. He bought pieces from Eve every so often. They were—just good friends."

"Maybe that's what he meant by business," Malone said. "You go home. I'll call you later "

"What are you going to *do?"* the blonde said.

"I'm going to start earning that money," Malone said. He reached for the check and unfolded it.

"All right," the blonde said. She was out the door by the time Malone had read the line on the check that read: "Five Hundred and 00/100 Dollars," and long before he drew his gaze down to the bottom line, where her name was signed.

"G. G. G. McIlhenny "

Malone realized he didn't know his client's first name. He didn't know any of her first names. The bank must, though, he told himself cheerfully as he pocketed the check, stood up, and left his office.

4.

The sign outside the door read, in a curlicued script: *Eve Washington. Ceramics.* There was a tiny buzzer underneath.

Malone pressed it. He wondered briefly what a mud-pie maker was doing on the tenth floor of Chicago's most exclusive set of apartments, but decided that there must be more to the business than met the eye. He was congratulating himself on his fairness when there was a click and the door swung open.

Malone stepped into a room which reminded him of some of the worst scenes from *Bertha, The Sewing Machine Girl,* the scenes that showed Bertha's life in her poverty-ridden home. Old grey jugs and shapes were everywhere, along with a fantastic litter composed of straw, sawdust, wood shavings and ancient yellow newspapers. Over everything hung a cloud of dust.

From a long way off Malone heard a whirring sound which reminded him of a sawmill. He called, tentatively: "Hello?"

"Just a minute," a voice called back. Malone stared around him at the mess, and waited. When the minute was up, and had taken two or three more with it, a very dusty woman in an old smock appeared at the inner entrance of the room. "Yes?" she said.

"I've come to see Miss Washington," Malone said. "My name is John J Malone."

"You'd like to buy something?" the dusty woman said. She was only a little shorter than the little lawyer; her face was heart-shaped and her hair, as much of it as wasn't covered by dust, was a very dark brown. She might have been, Malone thought, twenty-eight.

"I'd like to see Miss Washington," he said. "I've got a few questions for her."

"I'm Eve Washington," the woman said. "But I'm quite busy now, I'm afraid. I really don't have time for interviews . . "

"It's about Jabez McIlhenny," Malone said.

The woman stepped back. "You're with the police?"

Malone shook his head. "Just a friend," he said. "I understand he's disappeared, and I'd like to ask a few questions."

"I told the police everything," Eve Washington said. "Why don't you ask them?"

"This will only take a minute," Malone said. "Besides, I might be a customer. You never know "

"So you might." Surprisingly, Eve Washington laughed. The sound, like her voice, came from low in her throat. "Come in to my studio. McIlhenny was the only man I allowed back there, but you're a friend of his. Besides, you look as crazy as I am." She turned and went through the entrance again. Malone followed her.

They went through a long hall, and came out into a large airy room which seemed even more cluttered than the entrance room. Malone noticed four ashtrays, all made of baked clay, piled on a littered couch which, he estimated, had originally cost something over a thousand dollars. One of the ashtrays had three lipsticked cigarettes and a dusty cigar butt in it. The others were empty, but filmed with powdery dust. Malone felt as if he needed a bath.

In one corner a square box sat and whirred to itself quietly "Kiln," Eve Washington said, noticing Malone's stare. "It bakes clay Up to three thousand

degrees in that furnace, so I wouldn't get too close if I were you."

Malone backed even farther away from the box. "Jabez McIlhenny disappeared just over two weeks ago," he said. "On a Tuesday " Somehow, that approach didn't sound right. "He was coming to see you when he left home, and his niece hasn't seen him since," he said after a pause.

The dusty woman waited, and finally said "Yes?"

"When did he leave here?" Malone asked.

"He never arrived here," she said. "You say he was coming to see me?"

"That's right."

"He always called me in advance," Eve Washington said. "Every few weeks he would call, and I'd have a new piece ready for him to look at. He had fine taste, Mr Malone. He always knew just what he wanted—and let me tell you, after some of the batty old ladies who come up and want little presents for their nephews . "

"I'm sure," Malone said sympathetically. "But this Tuesday—the day he disappeared he didn't call?"

"No," she said. "I was expecting him to call me—it was about time, you know—and I had this all ready for him." She produced an object from the litter Malone stared at a light-green vase about a foot and a half tall. "I've still got it, in case he does show up, you know. He'd want to have this." She patted the vase fondly. "And a real bargain, too," she said. "Only three hundred dollars."

Malone nodded absently "Miss Washington," he said. "Do you know of any enemies Mr McIlhenny had?"

"Had?" she said. "You mean he's dead?"

Malone thought it over There seemed no harm in admitting the truth. "He's been missing for two weeks," he said, "and his niece hasn't gotten any ransom notes, or any word from him. He's probably dead. I'm looking for the person who killed him."

"Maybe he just got tired and went away," the woman said. Under the smock, Malone noticed, she was really very pretty Maybe the vase was worth three hundred dollars. After all, Malone thought, he was no judge of vases. Three hundred dollars might even be a bargain. Maybe he could take Eve Washington out to dinner, and they could talk it over.

He reminded himself sternly that he was investigating what was almost certainly a murder, and that he had to leave Chicago the next day anyhow

"People don't get tired and go away," he said. "Not without leaving some kind of note."

"Maybe the note hasn't been found yet," Eve Washington said.

Malone looked around the room. If the McIlhenny home looked anything like the Eve Washington Ceramics Studio, the note might not be found for months. But he doubted it.

"Did he have any enemies?" Malone asked again.

"Not that I know of," Eve Washington said. "He was such a sweet old man."

"I know," Malone said.

"He discovered me, you know I was just another ceramicist, struggling to get along—you know how it is."

Malone tried to imagine a struggling ceramicist, but the image wouldn't come. He couldn't even pronounce the phrase, let alone go any farther

"Well," she was saying, "I showed some of my work at a small gallery, and Mr McIlhenny dropped in one afternoon—and that was that. He bought several pieces, and word got around, you know I feel quite grateful to him. I'd be terribly broken up if anything happened to him."

"You haven't—heard from him since the Tuesday he disappeared?" Malone said.

"Of course not," she said. "I still have the vase, don't I?" She seemed to realize that she was still holding it, and suddenly smiled dazzingly at Malone. "Here," she said. "You take it. I can't hold a piece forever, you know. People might see it and want it. But if you see Mr. McIlhenny, you can give it to him."

Malone refrained from pointing out, again, that her client was probably beyond any interest in green vases. He didn't, he told himself, want to see Eve Washington all broken up, even though it would be nice to hold her head on his shoulder and dry her tears. He had, he thought sternly, too much to do, and almost no time to do it in.

He took the vase. "If I see him," he said.

"He'll pay me, of course," Eve Washington said. "You don't even have to mention money to him. He'll call me right up and send me a check."

The vase weighed a little over two pounds. Malone decided he'd better put it in his office safe before going on to his next suspect. Martine would just have to wait, he thought.

Somehow, he managed to get to the street with the green vase clutched firmly in his arms. He hailed a cab with difficulty, gave the driver directions to his office, and sat back in the leather seat. The vase was propped next to him.

Maybe I can put it on the shelf, Malone thought. Next to the rabbit. It might go nicely

5.

Back in his office, Malone admired the vase some more. It really was nice, he thought. It gave dignity to his office, right up there on the shelf. He could put it in the safe, but it was too pretty to be in a safe. And the cleaning woman wouldn't knock it over He'd warn her about it.

On second thought, if he mentioned it she'd be self-conscious about it and knock it over trying to be extra-careful. He'd just have to let nature take its course.

Now, he told himself, for Martine.

It was at that point that he discovered he didn't know Martine's last name. He called a friendly night-club owner hurriedly.

"Girls named Martine?" the club-owner said. "Malone, they're all named Martine, or Sybil, or Fritzi. You find me a nice chorus girl named Bella, Malone, it'll be a big relief to me. Always Sybil or Martine or Fritzi. I mean it, Malone."

"You don't know a particular Martine who was friendly with Jabez McIlhenny?"

"None of them are particular, Malone. They're slobs. A bunch of slobs. I tell you, for one chorus-girl named Bella—she doesn't even have to dance, I'll just keep her around the club to tell people about. Look, Malone . . ."

With difficulty, Malone sidestepped an invitation to a "friendly little party" after hours. He promised the owner: "I'll do the same for you some time," and hung up.

He could, of course, ask Von Flanagan. But somehow, he told himself, he didn't want to go to the police. They'd given him the case and he was going to solve it for them and show them. Vaguely, he wondered just what he was going to show them, but didn't get very far with the idea.

He remembered the servants. Paul Finn and Rose Billington. If he went to the McIlhenny home now, the servants would be there and he could talk to them, and find out Martine's last name from Miss McIlhenny at the same time. Maybe Miss McIlhenny's first name was Georgette. Georgette Georgina—er—Georgie McIlhenny. It had a nice ring to it, Malone thought.

The servants were having a romance, he remembered suddenly That had sounded important, but it probably wasn't. He had the impression that he'd heard something that hadn't sounded important, but really had been. He tried to think of it, without success. Maybe, he told himself, it had been something he'd seen, and not something he'd heard at all.

When he found himself muttering: "Servants should be seen and not heard," he gave up. On the way out of the office he told Maggie:

"Put some flowers in the vase. And don't wait up for me. Just leave a light burning in the window."

"You take care of yourself, Malone," Maggie told him.

He thought of the crumbling McIlhenny mansion, and shivered. Then he told himself not to be silly.

And he wondered what was silly about being afraid of a house which almost certainly had ghosts—and one ghost, in particular, who'd just joined the crowd in the last two weeks or so.

The cabbie looked up at the stone steps winding up to the mansion. "Some rich place," he said.

"Some people think it's pretty," Malone said defensively.

"Me," said the cabbie, "I think it's haunted."

Malone paid him with trembling hands. "Everybody to his own opinion," he said. He started up the steps, feeling as if ominous organ music followed him at every turn. Far, far below him, he heard the cab clash its gears and speed away, and he felt very lonely.

He climbed grimly to the top of the steps and faced the old oaken door. There was a silver knocker projecting from its center. Malone reached out, pulled his hand back, told himself not to be silly, and knocked once, timidly.

After a minute he tried again, a little louder.

The door opened with a creak, and Malone paled. A cadaverous face looked out at him. The face had eyes that burned right through Malone, and bushy black eyebrows. The eyebrows raised, slowly.

"Yes?" the face said.

Malone said: "I'm here to see Miss McIlhenny." He congratulated himself on remaining so calm.

"Whom shall I say is calling?" said the face in sepulchural tones.

"Me," Malone said. "I."

"Your name?" said the face.

Malone gave it, hurriedly. The door banged shut again.

Many years passed before it opened again. Malone was sure that his hair was white, if he had any hair left at all. He passed an experimental hand over his scalp and felt, but he couldn't tell the color. He chewed on his cigar, nervously.

Finally the door swung slowly open, and a familiar face peered out. "Oh, Malone," the blonde said. "Come in. Paul didn't know—I didn't mention your name to him when I went out . . ." Malone entered.

"That was Paul Finn," Malone said in the hall. "The—man who opened the door." He was beginning to feel better The blonde had offered to mix him a drink, and he lit a fresh cigar. He really hadn't been afraid at all, he told himself. All that was just silliness.

"Of course," she said. "A friend of yours is here."

"Really? Malone said.

"A policeman. I told him there was no need for him to do anything at all, now that you've agreed to take over, but he insisted on being here when you arrived. He said he wanted to ask you some questions."

Malone felt a cold knot in his stomach. "Von Flanagan," he said.

"He said that was his name, Malone. He's waiting in the living room. Come on, and you'll have that drink, and we can talk." She paused. "Have you found out anything yet?"

"I've found out your uncle had an enemy," Malone said savagely. He thought of Von Flanagan, and Eve Washington, and his ship tickets, and wondered why he had ever let himself get involved in the case.

"Who was his enemy, Malone?" the blonde said anxiously

"Me," the lawyer snapped, and marched past her into the living room.

6.

The blonde (Georgina? Malone thought. Gertrude? Gwendolyn?) went off to see about the drinks, and Malone and the police captain were left alone.

"It's murder, you know, Malone," Von Flanagan said.

"I thought it was," Malone said. "Two weeks is a long time."

"He didn't have any motive to disappear. Everything was going fine for him, just the usual way. Only he didn't have any enemies."

"That's what I found out," Malone said.

"Every rich man has enemies," Von Flanagan said sagely. "Even I have enemies, and what have I got?"

"Enemies," Malone suggested.

"I mean money. If I have enemies, Jabez McIlhenny had enemies. Somebody killed him, after all."

"Maybe it was an accident," Malone said. "Maybe he walked into the path of a car."

"We've checked every hospital and morgue record for the last two weeks," Von Flanagan said sourly. "Somebody managed to dispose of his body perfectly That was no accident."

"Maybe he jumped in the river."

"In this weather?" Von Flanagan said. "It's cold out. He'd have to be crazy—and he wasn't any crazier than usual."

"How do you know?"

"Questioning the niece," Von Flanagan said. "Unless she knocked off the old man . . . she could lie about it, I suppose, just to make things tough for me."

Miss McIlhenny returned with the drinks, and there were several minutes of meaningless conversation before Von Flanagan said: "Look, Miss, I'd like to talk to Malone privately. Can we . . "

"Of course," she said. "You stay right there. I've got work to do in the kitchen, anyhow."

When she was gone, Malone said: "What motive would she have for killing her uncle?"

"That's what I can't figure out," Von Flanagan admitted. "The old guy left his money to an animal home. He never had any pets, and he felt guilty about it. He left a couple of thousand apiece to the servants, but nothing at all to his niece except a fund that would bring her about ten grand a year. She was getting more than that when he was alive."

"Maybe he threatened to stop giving her any money," Malone said.

"I talked to the servants myself," Von Flanagan said. "They didn't hear anything like that. Everything was peaceful."

Malone said "She didn't do it. She's my client."

"Now, Malone . . ."

"I know she didn't. I don't know why I know, but I know Does that make sense?"

"No," Von Flanagan said. "And you couldn't take it into court."

"She mentioned a chorus girl named Martine," Malone said.

"Martine Vignette," Von Flanagan said. "That's her name. We talked to her It seems she and old McIlhenny were just good friends. Sure. She's got kind of a temper, Malone. Maybe she got mad one night and bashed his head in."

"And made him disappear like a ghost," Malone suggested. "You searched her home, and the night club she works at, didn't you?"

"Sure we did," the police captain said bitterly. "People just go out of their way to make things tough for me, Malone. I never wanted to be a cop . ."

Malone sat back, closed his eyes and waited until Von Flanagan was finished with his complaint. Then he said: "How about somebody else?"

"There isn't anybody else," Von Flanagan said. "Some crazy sculptor, this Martine Vignette, and the niece herself."

"Von Flanagan," Malone said. "What's her name?"

"The niece?"

"That's right."

"McIlhenny," Von Flanagan said.

"I mean her first name."

A blank look passed over the police captain's face. "You know," he said, "I never asked."

"Neither did I," Malone said.

"I only waited for you, Malone, because I wanted to talk to you before we pulled the niece in. Just in case. Not that I think you have anything . . . I mean, you can't go up against the Chicago police force . . . but . . "

"Wait a minute, Von Flanagan."

"I called your office and that girl of yours said you were on your way down here. Malone, can you think of one reason why we shouldn't take her in?"

"She didn't do it," Malone said. "I saw something—or heard something—"

"What, Malone?"

"I don't know," the little lawyer admitted. He sighed deeply. "I'll find out, though, sooner or later."

"I can't sit on my hands forever," Von Flanagan said. "The Commissioner . . ."

"Give me an hour," Malone said. "Just one hour."

"Malone, it's illegal . . ."

"One hour, Von Flanagan, or I'll . . . tell your wife about that poker game."

"One hour," the officer said sadly "Malone, I don't like this any more than you do. The Com-

missioner's niece by marriage . . ."

"Don't worry, Von Flanagan," Malone said grandly "I'll get you out of the fix."

The police captain's voice turned a violent purple. "Look here, Malone . . ."

"One hour," Malone said. "You promised."

Rose Billington's story was a simple one. Malone looked at her long, sad, horselike face and thought what a perfect match she and the cadaverous Paul Finn would make. They looked like two Charles Addams creations, he thought. He cocked a sympathetic ear

"I told the story already three times, to the police. Now you want me to tell it all over again. I wasn't even here, me and Paul went out. We went to the movies. I told the police already three times what we saw."

"Did you notice anything unusual when you left the house?"

"It was just like always," Rose said. "Old Mr McIlhenny, he was dressing up to go out, but he didn't say where, so don't ask me."

"I won't," Malone said.

"Miss McIlhenny, she was sleeping, like sometimes she sleeps late. Me and Paul, we went to a movie. You want to know what we saw?"

"No," Malone said, "that won't be necessary " He wished he had another drink. "Mr. McIlhenny's will leaves you each a little money. Enough to get married on."

"Oh, we don't want to get married," Rose said.

"You don't?"

"Paul, he's married already, so we don't want to break the law or anything. He married some woman in New York, and he can't get a divorce or anything because that would make her feel he didn't want her any more and that's bad for you, Paul says. He reads psychology "

"Doesn't she doesn't she feel he doesn't want her any more now that he's in Chicago?"

"That's different, Paul says. He reads a lot. So we just go out like to the movies. I could tell you all about the movie, what we saw "

Malone felt his head whirling rapidly. "I don't need to know," he said. "As a matter of fact, I don't want to know It would spoil things."

"It was a pretty good movie," Rose said.

"I'm sure," Malone said.

Paul's story backed up the maid's. "We went to see a film," was the way he put it. Malone refrained from asking about the first Mrs. Finn. There was no sense in complicating things any further

That left only Martine Vignette. But Von Flanagan had searched for McIlhenny's body and found nothing at all. You could trust Von Flanagan to conduct a search like that, Malone thought.

All the same, G. G. G. McIlhenny hadn't committed any murders.

But if she hadn't, who had?

Or had her uncle Jabez just gotten tired and gone away, the way Eve Washington had suggested?

That didn't sound right, either

The whole thing was a mess, Malone thought.

A mess.

Suddenly his head came up and he marched to the living room. Von Flanagan was sitting in an overstuffed chair, looking uncomfortable.

"I'll be right back," Malone said. "Don't go away "

"Where are you going?" the police captain asked.

Malone chewed on his cigar with satisfaction. "To bring you back a killer," he said. "Now don't go away."

"Malone " Von Flanagan began, but the little lawyer was out of the front door and running down the steps as if he didn't even care about breaking his neck.

Von Flanagan sighed and settled back in the chair

7.

"All right," the killer said, a half-hour later in Von Flanagan's office. "I did it. He deserved to die!"

Gadenski took the murderer away. Von Flanagan tipped his feet up on the desk and said to Malone "I was sure it was the niece."

"It had to be somebody else," Malone said. "If she'd killed her uncle, she wouldn't have come to me to find him. I've got a reputation, after all."

"But why . . ."

"Well, I found this note in her couch, slipped under the cushions. Probably fell there by accident. The trouble with Eve Washington was, she never cleaned house."

"You didn't know about the note when you went there."

"No, but it gives you a motive," Malone said. "It's from McIlhenny, and it tells her he's not going to marry her. It seems they were a little more than good friends after all—and when he came over to tell her in person she blew up and hit him with whatever was handy. That studio of hers has lots of things to hit a man with."

"But . ." Von Flanagan shook his head.

"The cigar butt in the ashtray," Malone said. "I saw it there the first time I came to her house. And she said nobody but McIlhenny ever came to her studio. I didn't think she would smoke cigars. So, she must have been lying. If she'd ever cleaned up that studio of hers, she might have been safe forever "

"They always slip up somewhere," Von Flanagan said gravely "But how did she dispose of—how'd she get rid of him?"

Malone lit a fresh cigar and blew a cloud of

smoke. "She's confessed, and I'm not going to take her case, because I'm going to Havana," he said. "So you don't need to know how she got rid of Jabez McIlhenny, and that'll just be our little secret."

"Malone!"

"I've got good reasons," the little lawyer said. "I'd think you could trust me by this time. After I've solved a case for you."

"You solved it?" Von Flanagan said. "She confessed here. Right in this office."

"Listen, Von Flanagan," Malone said. "One more word out of you, and I—I won't even send you a card from Havana."

"You listen to me, Malone," the officer began, but the little lawyer was gone.

At the bank, he cashed G. G. G. McIlhenny's check. "Incidentally," he asked a teller, "what do the initials stand for?"

"You mean you don't know?" the teller said.

"That's right," Malone said.

"You ask her," the teller said. "She gave you a check, you must know her."

Malone hunted up a phone booth and put in a call.

"Oh, you darling man, I knew you could solve it . . ." the blonde cooed at him from the other end of the wire.

Malone decided that too much was, very definitely, even more than enough. "Your uncle's dead," he said sternly.

"Oh, Malone, I can't even think of Uncle Jabez now that I know you're so handsome and clever . . ."

Malone muttered something impolite. "Miss McIlhenny, I have a question to ask you."

"Oh," she said. "Oh. The answer is—yes, Malone. Yes."

"The question," he said grimly, "is: what do the initials stand for?"

There was a long silence on the other end of the wire. "My friends call me G-G," she said. "Like the French name."

Malone waited.

"Well," she said, "father and mother both wanted a boy, but they were resigned to God's will. So when I arrived I was christened God Giveth Girls. God Giveth Girls McIlhenny."

"Oh," said Malone. Very slowly, he hung up. Then he picked up the receiver again and dialled his office.

Maggie answered at once. "Malone, there's a man here with a bill for the telephone, and . . ."

"I'll be there in the morning," Malone said. "I'll pay everything before I leave. Oh, and Maggie . . ." He thought for a second of the square humming box in Eve Washington's studio, and of the kiln that could heat up to three thousand degrees. It could reduce a body to nothing but ash, and you could mix the ash with clay and never worry that anyone would find traces of the man you'd killed . . .

"Yes, Malone?" Maggie said.

"Don't forget to put some fresh flowers in Mr. McIlhenny before you leave."

He hung up. After all, he told himself consolingly, it was a *very* pretty vase . . .

Polite Heister

A man walked into a Hartford, Conn., dry cleaning shop with a gun and ordered the clerk, Mrs. Carmela Albanese, to give him the money. She gave him $50. Before he fled, the bandit kissed her hand and murmured: "You are such a nice woman."

Self Justice

Municipal Judge John T McWilliams, of Dearborn, Mich., entered his courtroom recently and pounded his gavel. The baliff called out the first case: "The people against Judge McWilliams," and handed His Honor three unpaid parking tickets.

The judge found himself guilty on two of the counts and paid the fine of $10. On the third ticket, he argued with himself, stating: "This one is for parking in a municipal court lot. I've got a right to do that." Then he upheld his argument and dismissed the charge.

Censorship

The Cook County sheriff in Chicago recently checked some books submitted for establishing a circulating library in the jail. But he banned one volume. It was titled: "You Can Escape."

SHE WAS beautiful in black. Even climbing the hotel stairs, flight after long flight upward, she moved with ease and ineffable grace. Anyone seeing her might have wondered, however, why she bothered to climb the stairs at all. Why she did not, that is, take the elevator. But no one saw her. She was very careful that no one did.

On the floor to which she was climbing, which happened to be the twelfth, she walked with assurance to the numbered door which was her objective. She knocked without hesitation, and the door was opened after only the slightest delay The man who opened it was neither particularly young nor particularly old, having reached that interim span of years which has, in certain instances, a charm superior to its past or future. He smiled graciously and bowed slightly, bending ever so briefly from the hips. He was extremely handsome, she noted at

TRESPASSER

"You seem very calm," Agnew told her. "Do you realize I could ruin you for life—and that you couldn't stop me?"

by

FLETCHER FLORA

once, his black hair and thin black mustache neatly trimmed and meticulously groomed, his white teeth flashing in his face. Together, she and he, they made a striking pair

"Mr Agnew?" she said.

"You're an hour early, Mrs. Fenimore," he said, nodding. "But it's unimportant. Won't you come in, please?"

"Thank you."

She walked past him through a short hall into the sitting room of a small suite, simply and expensively furnished. She could look at an angle through an open door into a corner of the bedroom, and she thought that the rental on the suite, though not exorbitant, was certainly substantial.

"You're living quite comfortably," she said. "I understood from our conversation over the telephone that you were desperately in need of funds. Practically destitute."

She turned to face him as she spoke with a dry inflection of irony, remarking with a faint feeling of admiration, which did not show or significantly modify her predisposition toward him, that he was not in the least disconcerted. He smiled again, ruefully, rather like a philosophical delinquent caught out of hand in mischief.

"I'm anticipating an improvement in my financial condition. A quite considerable sum of cash, to be exact."

"Really? Isn't it rather risky to obligate yourself on the strength of a possibility?"

"I'd say that this is somewhat more than a possibility. Probability, I'd say. The truth is, I consider it a certainty I'm so confident that I've even obligated myself for a bottle of very fine brandy May I offer you some?"

"No, thanks. I'm not particularly fond of brandy."

"Too bad. A cocktail, then?"

"A cocktail would be pleasant. A martini if you have it."

"Of course. I hardly ever drink martinis myself, but I'm aware of your partiality to them. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Fenimore, I know quite a great deal about you in general. But we'll get to that in good time. Won't you sit down while I mix the drinks?"

"Thank you."

She sat down on the edge of a deep chair upholstered with some heavy fabric treated to afford additional resistance to stains and burns. Holding her knees primly together, her body erect, she laid her purse on the knees and folded her hands on the purse. Watching him measure ingredients into a shaker, she was poised and perfectly still. The rise and fall of her breasts was barely discernible in the quiet cadence of her breathing. When he brought her martini to her, she took it and nodded her thanks and wet her lips in it and waited. Crossing to a chair opposite hers, with perhaps five feet of gray carpet between, he sat down facing her and crossed his legs and seemed for a moment to be considering what he should say. Lifting his fragile glass, containing one of the martinis he hardly ever drank, he performed what might have been a subtle salute to her beauty, or possibly to the perfect poise that disturbed him more than he liked to admit or intended to show.

"You are much lovelier than I expected," he said. "Frankly, I'm reluctant to waste our time with the dull conditions of a business arrangement."

"Do you concede, then, that it's a waste of time?"

"Not at all. I didn't mean it that way."

"We'll see. Suppose you state the conditions."

"They've already been stated. I did that over the phone. We have met, I think, to consummate them."

"Nevertheless, you had better repeat them. I want to be certain where I stand."

"Certainly Happy to oblige, of course. You are to hand me fifty thousand dollars with which to pay for my fine brandy that you are not fond of. In return for this reasonable sum, I guarantee my silence regarding a period of your life with which we are both familiar."

"Are we?"

"I assure you that I know very nearly as much about this regrettable time as you do yourself."

"I'm not convinced."

"Surely you don't want me to give you an account in detail. I'm quite sincere in saying that I'd rather not subject you to the embarassment."

"Never mind that. I'll try to bear it."

Looking at her across the five feet of space, lifting his glass to his lips again, he was once more aware of genuine admiration for her poise. Also for her beauty. He wished for a second that he could have approached her from a different position, with a different intention. He wished it, for the second, in spite of the fifty thousand dollars and all the brandy it would buy. For another second, following the first, he was uncomfortably incredulous that this sleek woman had actually committed the extraordinary follies, and worse, far worse, that constituted the substance of the savory little case history he had begun by chance and completed by design. Both seconds passed, however, and the wish and the doubt with the seconds.

"Whatever you say," he said. "For your sake, I'll restrict myself to essentials. Just enough to convince you once again that I'm not running a bluff."

"Thank you so much. I'm grateful for your consideration."

"Sarcasm? You seemed disturbed enough on the telephone, Mrs. Fenimore—so much so that I took none of the usual secondary precautions—no messages left in case of my death, you see. Well, no matter To get on with our business, you were born in this city thirty years ago."

"Please. Twenty-eight."

"Very well. I allow you the two years. What's more important, you had the good luck to be born

the only daughter of Reuben Webster, which made you heir to several million of dollars."

"That's public knowledge. If you know anything significant, you had better get to it."

"Sorry. I promised to restrict myself to essentials, I know, but you must admit that the millions *are* essential. If it weren't for them, I'd scarcely have gone to so much time and effort to develop my proposition. All right, then. You were the only daughter of Reuben Webster, and at the age of twenty by my account, eighteen by yours, you disappeared. Not many people knew that. Very few. It was feared at first that you had been abducted, but of course you hadn't. You had merely run away. You wrote your father once from St. Louis to assure him you were all right. You wrote him once more, quite a while later, from Los Angeles. That was all. If you will pardon me for saying it, I have learned that you had, as a girl, what is commonly known as a queer streak. A proclivity, let's say, for the unconventional. The sensational. Even, unfortunately, the illegal. The thing that saved you, so far as your father was concerned, was that he had the same proclivity. Therefore, he was inclined to forgive you. He wanted you to come home, but he did not insist, and when he died four years ago, he left you his fortune without any strings, just as if you had been a good, obedient girl instead of what you were."

"You're being quite a bore. I haven't yet heard a word that is worth the smallest fraction of fifty thousand dollars."

"You want me to go on? I'd much prefer not having to become any more personal than I've already been compelled to be."

"And I'd much prefer not having to hand you fifty thousand dollars."

"I see your point." He distorted his lips to show that the taste of what he was going to say was already sour in his mouth. "Well, your father devised an explanation for your absence. He said you were in Switzerland, I believe, but that's irrelevant to the matter in hand. You were actually, of course, elsewhere. Los Angeles and points south, to be precise. Much of the time in Mexico City. I suppose, actually, that it would take a corps of psychiatrists to explain this period in your life. Let's just say that you were living with your queer streak. Satisfying a rather perverted need for questionable thrills. Many things were involved. Narcotics for a while. A number of men, naturally. You were known to everyone as Maria Melendez. Your appearance and a fluency in Spanish made it quite easy for you to pass as a cultured Mexican woman. Have I said enough?"

"Not quite."

"You're very hard to convince, Mrs. Fenimore. I admire your spirit, and I truly regret the necessity for taking my present position in this."

"It's possible that you'll regret it even more before you're finished. I understand, however, that one must pay his brandy bill. Go on, please."

"One more point should be sufficient. Among the men Maria Melendez knew was one named Brannigan. He had a private lodge in the mountains. He died there one night. Shot to death. There was some evidence of a woman's having been there at the time. The police worked on that angle but never came up with anything conclusive. I knew Brannigan. Many people even thought we were friends, but that was something of an exaggeration. Believe me, I did not grieve for him then, and I don't regret his death now Vengeance, I mean, is no consideration. Anyhow, I had access to certain information that the police did not have, and I know that there was, in fact, a woman at the lodge, and I know who she was. Her name was Maria Melendez."

"Can you prove this?"

"I'm sure I can. However, I'm equally sure that I'll not be called upon to do so. Maria Melendez is dead. Mrs. Fenimore, I think, does not want her resurrected."

"True. Maria Melendez is dead. Without benefit of psychiatry. Did you ever see her? Do you know what she looked like?"

His brows arched in the faintest expression of surprise. "Allowing for the possibility of a little dye and certain tricks of dress and makeup, I rather fancy that she looked like you, Mrs. Fenimore. However, I never saw her, actually."

"You don't, then, actually know what she looks like now."

"Oh, yes. Certainly Would you like me to describe her? It will be a pleasure after the regrettable things I've been forced to say about her." His eyes made a leisurely inventory of the woman opposite him. "She is quite tall and slender. Beautiful body. Incredibly lovely face. Very dark brown hair which she wisely pulls back simply into a bun. Impeccable taste in clothes. Truly a ravishing woman."

"How charming of you to say so."

"I prefer being charming when I'm allowed. It makes one's relationships so much more amicable. Are you prepared to deal with me now?"

"Yes," she said, "I'm prepared to deal with you."

And then a small series of events happened in very rapid sequence. The brittle crystal in her hand dropped softly to the carpet. The remains of the martini it contained ran out into the pile of the gray carpet, making a dark stain. In the hand that held the glass, a stubby blue automatic appeared in an instant, apparently taken from the purse on the prim knees. In accomplishing this, Mrs. Fenimore hardly seemed to move. She still sat poised, in an instant resumption of stillness, on the edge of her chair

In the eyes of the man who called himself Agnew was a flickering of fear that was barely discernible before it was gone. He leaned forward slightly

toward the automatic, apparently trying to convince himself that such a vulgar element had actually been introduced.

"I do hope you don't intend anything indiscreet," he said. "I'd never rest easily, I assure you, if I were, as a victim, even incidentally responsible for the execution of a beautiful woman."

She smiled, nodding her head in a slight gesture of acceptance without disturbing the stillness of the rest of her body.

"It's the worst kind of mistake to compliment the *wrong* woman."

"I accept your judgment, but I don't see how it pertains."

"It's simple. I mean that I'm not Mrs. Fenimore. My name is Ellen Melton. I'm Mrs. Fenimore's secretary."

"I see." He leaned back and made a tent of his fingers, looking at her over the tips. "A prerogative of the rich. She sent you to handle the matter for her. I apologize for my mistake."

"It's not the only one you've made. Nor the worst."

"Is that so? I'm becoming deeply ashamed of myself. Tell me the worst at once."

"Gladly. Your worst mistake is trespassing."

"Perhaps I'm dull. Again I don't understand."

"Let me clarify it. I've known Mrs. Fenimore for quite a long time. In fact, I knew Maria Melendez. I know about her all the facts that you know, and many others besides. I was on the west coast with her When she returned here after the death of her father, I couldn't bear to be separated from her. Especially after I'd discovered who she really was. She told no one she was coming here, of course, and none of us had known her true identity. By methods that were no doubt similar to yours, I traced her. She had assumed, naturally, a way of life that could not possibly afford to recognize the old way. Besides, she had married and wished to remain married. She was living quietly, as she now does, avoiding publicity and never permitting her picture to appear in print. Wisely, when I arrived, she accepted me. I have a position that requires of me precisely nothing. I am paid a salary that is twenty times the normal salary of a secretary I live exceedingly well and have many pleasures. All this in spite of the fact that Mrs. Fenimore would like to see me dead."

"Now I understand clearly." His lips formed what was very close to a sneer, a common expression he would ordinarily have scorned. "You are yourself a blackmailer. An unpleasant word, I know, but surely one that you and I can use between us."

"Use whatever words you like. I have no fear of words. I'm determined, however, that my position shall not be jeopardized. Mrs. Fenimore is practical. She accepts our relationship as being the most tolerable and least dangerous one possible, especially since I have intelligence enough to be conservative in my requests. But I remember her as Maria Melendez. Maria Melendez was a dangerous woman, and she is not dead, after all, as we previously said. She is still alive, still dangerous. Alive and dangerous in Mrs. Fenimore, who can be forced only so far She accepts me, but she would not accept you. Not both of us. There is no accommodation for another blackmailer, and you can see, of course, that your position makes mine extremely vulnerable. Whatever action she took against you, I would surely be included and destroyed incidentally I'm trying to tell you, Mr. Agnew, that you are about to spoil a good thing. You are, in brief, a trespasser."

"I can see that you have some justice to your claim. I admit it." The suggestion of a sneer was gone from his lips now, and he watched her intently "Tell me, Miss Melton. Since Mrs. Fenimore did not send you here, how did you learn of our appointment?"

"Perhaps you'll remember that I answered the telephone when you called. I listened on an extension while she talked with you."

"Well, really! Eavesdropping? That's a crudity I'd not have believed of you."

"My life is precarious, and my position is delicate. I resort to all sorts of crudities to preserve both. I've already left a note for my employer, telling her that the appointment has been cancelled."

"Quite right, too. We can't permit the niceties to interfere with self-preservation, can we? That, in a way, is my argument now However, I concede your prior claim. I'll withdraw my own."

But he was lying, of course, as she knew perfectly well, and when he lifted his glass as if to pledge his word, she shot him three times with the small blue automatic. The explosions made very little noise, and so did he. He gasped and coughed and sighed and lay back in his chair as if he were suddenly very tired. Rising, she put the automatic in her purse, retrieved the martini glass from the floor, walked into the bathroom. She washed the glass in the lavatory, wiping it dry on a hand towel and carrying it in the towel back into the living room. She replaced it on the table from which Agnew had taken it, returned the towel to the bathroom, and then, without looking at the body in the chair, she went out of the room into the hall and back to the lobby by way of the stairs.

But she did not leave the hotel at once. Crossing the lobby, she entered a cocktail lounge and sat at a tiny round table and ordered a martini, which she drank slowly Drinking, she thought of Mrs. Fenimore, quietly cultivating her own special terror. She decided that she would have just one more martini before she left.

DEATH OF A STRIPPER

by
SHERRY LA VERNE
The Seven Veils Girl

Mimi wasn't going to kill Lucette personally. She had a nice, obliging friend to do the job.

From a physical point of view Dave Exeter was a good choice for Mimi Love. At thirty-five he was tall, lean and distinguished-looking. At twenty-five Mimi was tall and brunette, with lovely features, a full, passionate mouth and a figure which was outstanding even in a profession where an exceptional figure is a must. Exeter's handsomeness combined with her beauty turned heads everywhere they appeared together.

From an emotional point of view the manager of the Exeter Burlesque Troupe was the poorest choice she could have made, for Mimi was a one-man woman. Exeter took his women as casually as some men choose clothing, and discarded them just as casually when he tired of them.

It came as a complete surprise to Mimi when, at the beginning of her second season with Exeter's show, the show manager switched his attention to a new addition to the troupe named Lucette Duval.

Lucette too was a standout beauty, even in a profession based on beauty. She, too, was tall, as most strippers are, with golden hair, green eyes and a body of perfect symmetry.

Although heartbroken when the show manager discarded her for Lucette, Mimi didn't blame Exeter. She loved him too deeply to find fault with him even after being jilted. She put the whole blame on Lucette, convincing herself that the new girl had worked some kind of mystic spell over Exeter, a spell he had been powerless to resist.

Exeter himself was responsible for this feeling. As a past-master at ending affairs without messiness, he over-exerted himself to avoid hard feelings when he broke the news to Mimi that she was no

longer his mistress.

"I'd rather cut off my arm than hurt you, honey," he told her in the small-boy tone he used when he wanted to escape blame by appearing defenseless. "But a man can't help his feelings. I've tried every way I know to get her out of my thoughts. She's like a drug to me. With my mind I want to stick with you, but Lucette pulls at my heart so hard, I just can't resist it any more. Please don't hate me."

Exeter picked the last night of the troupe's one-week stand at a little theater off Main Street to break his news. Since it was their first engagement of the season, he had known Lucette exactly one week by then. But he made it sound as though his internal struggle had been going on for years.

Mimi burst into tears. "I couldn't ever hate you, Dave," she said between sobs. "You've just broken my heart, is all. Why did you have to hire that woman? I wish she was dead."

"Now, now," Exeter said, giving her naked shoulder a comforting pat. They were in Mimi's dressing room, she had just finished her strip act, and she hadn't gotten around to dressing yet. "Let's not have any hysterics. It's just something we both have to face."

Mimi wasn't prepared to face it, however. She accepted the situation because she had no other choice, but she refused to think of her romance with Dave Exeter as forever over. Her constant thought was that, if only Lucette were out of the way, her lover would return to her.

The Exeter Troupe was a travelling show, making the full swing of the burlesque circuit every season. Up to the time it reached Buffalo, Mimi was content with vague plans to somehow get Lucette dropped from the show But during their Buffalo engagement at the Palace Theater something occurred which made more drastic action necessary, if she didn't want to lose Exeter permanently.

The show manager announced at the backstage party he always gave after an opening-night show that he and Lucette Duval were going to be married.

Lucette had used a device as ancient as love to trap Dave Exeter into marriage. She teased him and tantalized him with her body, but she never let him have it. She drove him crazy by deliberately playing to him in the wings when he watched her strip act, then always exiting on the side of the stage opposite from the wing where he watched. Backstage, where female nakedness was as casually accepted as white lace at a wedding, Lucette was always sedately covered by a robe. The only time Exeter ever saw her nude body was on the stage, and the only familiarity she allowed him was a chaste good-night kiss.

He finally proposed marriage because she actually did begin to affect him like a drug, as he had claimed to Mimi. He had to have her, and he couldn't get her any other way.

The engagement announcement brought final realization to Mimi that she had lost her lover permanently.

Unless Lucette Duval died.

Mimi wasn't an enormously intelligent girl, but she was bright enough to know that if Lucette Duval were simply murdered, the first place the police would look would be at her. Everyone in the troupe knew of her burning torch for Dave Exeter and of her hate for Lucette. Even if she got away with murder, she sensed that Exeter would never accept her back if he even faintly suspected she was a murderess.

It was necessary for Lucette to die in such a way that suspicion couldn't possibly fall on Mimi.

That was as far as she got with her thinking for some time. Having arrived at this sound basic premise, her mind went blank. She found herself incapable of evolving any plan at all more subtle than shooting or stabbing the redhead, or pounding her over the head with a blunt instrument.

Fortunately she had plenty of time to plan, for Lucette wanted a June wedding, which gave Mimi the whole rest of the season. The troupe finished its engagement at the Palace and worked one week of a two-week stand in Chicago before she finally got an idea.

Her idea came from a crank fan letter addressed and mailed to her in care of the theater. Neither the envelope nor the letter inside bore any return address.

The letter was written in ink on plain linen stationery. The writing was even and literate, but nevertheless it was a crank letter.

The salutation was: "My dear Miss Love," and the letter read:

I hope you won't be offended by receiving a letter from an anonymous admirer, but I had to write to you. I have seen every performance of yours since you opened in Buffalo, and I think you are the most beautiful person I ever saw.

I intend to continue seeing you. I have enough money to afford travel for a time, and where your show goes, I will go.

Please don't think I am working up to a request to meet you. I am entirely content to worship you from afar.

I do worship you, you know. Not as men love women, but as men love goddesses. When I watch you disrobe from my darkened seat, it is with reverence instead of sexual desire.

It is a source of sorrow to me that the sight of your lovely body sometimes incites lascivious thoughts in other men. The lewd comments I hear around me when you are on the stage often make me want to kill the disgusting persons who utter them. As a matter of fact I nearly did kill the man seated next to me one night, when he emitted a particularly suggestive whistle. My knife was in my

hands and open when your act ended, the house lights came up, and it was too late.

I would do anything for you, if I had the opportunity. I would lay down my life for you, gladly. I would even kill for you. But, of course, I will never have the opportunity, because you will never know who I am.

I just want you to know that at least one member of your audience is worshipping you cleanly and reverently, as your beauty deserves.

The letter was signed: "Your worshiper, Bertie."

Mimi's first reaction was a queasy feeling in her stomach at the thougnt of an obvious madman having some peculiar kind of crush on her She wondered if she ought to turn the letter over to the police, so that they could catch the man before he murdered some innocent patron for whistling.

Then, as she read over the letter a second time, the idea struck her. The line, "I would even kill for you," gave it to her If it had been a normal love letter from a normal person, she wouldn't have taken the statement literally She would have accepted it as the flamboyant phrase of a lover, in the same category as the classic, "I would climb the highest mountain or swim the widest ocean." But this man was an obvious psycho. Maybe he *could* be induced to kill for her.

No one could blame her for Lucette's death if the redhead was murdered by a madman.

It was only the glimmering of a plan, but at least it was something to work on. The first step was to find out who the man was.

There was a tavern directly across State Street from the theater Immediately after her act that evening Mimi dressed and hurriedly left by the stage door. By the time the final curtain fell, she was seated in the tavern at a table next to the plate-glass window From here she was able to get an unobstructed view of the patrons as they filed from the theater.

Only a few women were in the crowd, all of them escorted. On the assumption that her anonymous fan would be alone, Mimi ignored pairs and groups of men, concentrating on those who seemed to be by themselves. As few people like to attend a theater alone, there weren't very many. She spotted less than a dozen lone men emerging, and she concentrated on each face, attempting to memorize it.

The following night she was in the same spot to watch again. Her plan was simple. If she recognized the same face two nights in a row, that should be her fan, for it wasn't likely that any man aside from him would attend the same show twice.

She only recognized one face among the lone men who came out, that of a slim, conservatively-dressed man in his late forties, who wore steel-rimmed glasses. Instantly she rose from her table, left the tavern and followed.

For two blocks she trailed him along State Street, then she turned into a sidestreet. Closing the gap beween them, she was right behind him when he slowed to turn in at the gate of a brick rooming house.

He glanced at her, then froze in position and stared at her.

Mimi gave him a brilliant smile. "Hello, Bertie."

He sucked in his breath and his lips moved soundlessly several times before he finally managed a whispered. "How did you know me?"

"I've been watching for you both nights since I got your letter," she said. "I wanted to meet the man who admires me so much."

He said nothing. She took advantage of the silence to study his face. A nearby street light fell directly on it, so that she could see him clearly. His letter had convinced her he was a dangerous maniac, and only the impelling necessity of using him as a tool had given her the courage to bring about this meeting. She searched his face for signs of insanity, but found none. He was of ordinary build, with a long, thin face, and the eyes behind his steel-rimmed glasses seemed gentle. He was neither good-looking nor ugly He was merely average-looking. The only abnormal thing about him was his expression, and that was hardly frightening. It was an expression of worship.

She broke the silence by asking: "Do you live here, Bertie?"

"Yes," he said. "It's handy to the theater."

She glanced at the building. "I don't suppose you're allowed female guests."

"If I leave the door open," he said. "Will you come in?"

She took his arm, feeling him tremble as she did so, and he led her to the door. It opened into a long hall with rooms off one side and a stairway to the upper floors facing them on the other. Directing her to the farthest door beyond the stairs, he keyed it open to disclose a bare room furnished with a brass bed, a dresser, one ancient easy chair and one wooden chair Mimi seated herself in the easy chair.

Carefully leaving the door open, Bertie stood before her in the humble manner of a subject before a queen. His eyes didn't stray over her body as she was accustomed to having most men's stray. They never left her face.

"Why did you want to know who I am?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "It was a very flattering letter, Bertie. I just wanted to know who wrote it. Are you sorry I found you?"

"Of course not," he said fervently "I hope you didn't think from my letter that I wouldn't like meeting you. I just meant you to know I wouldn't ever intrude myself on you. I wanted to make sure you didn't think I was just a stage-door

Johnnie."

"If I had thought that, I wouldn't be here, Bertie. I knew you wouldn't make passes at me, or anything like that."

He looked horrified at the thought. "I never think of you like that," he said. "You're a shrine to me. A shrine to beauty. I told you in my letter how I feel about you. It isn't the desire of a man for a woman. I wouldn't even be jealous if you had a husband or a lover. As a matter of fact I'd be glad. I'd be glad of anything that made you happy."

She smiled again. "Tell me about yourself, Bertie. What's your last name?"

"Snowden. Bertrand Snowden."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"Nothing for many years," he said. "I was an engineer once for a manufacturing plant in Buffalo. I draw royalties from an invention I made years back. Not much, but enough to live on. I haven't worked in fifteen years. I was in the hospital, and I only got out a few months ago."

"You were hospitalized for fifteen years? What was wrong with you?"

"I had a nervous breakdown. I was in Gowanda State Hospital near Buffalo."

"A nervous breakdown? Is that a mental hospital?"

"Yes," he said. "But I'm all right now. That's why they released me. I never was very sick. I wasn't crazy. It was just a nervous breakdown."

"A breakdown that lasted fifteen years? Why did they keep you so long, Bertie?"

"I cut some people. With this." His right hand dipped into his coat pocket, came out again and there was a sharp click. Light glittered from the seven-inch blade in his hand.

Mimi sat without movement, fear forcing her heart toward her throat as she stared at the razor-sharp blade. Noting her expression, a concerned look grew on his face. He snapped the knife shut and dropped it back in his pocket.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said. "I just wanted to show it to you. You don't have to worry. I wouldn't cut you."

As her fear drained away, a feeling of elation grew in her. He *was* a madman. She felt that if she handled things right, Lucette was as good as dead.

She asked: "Why do you carry that knife, Bertie?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just like the feel of it in my pocket, I guess. I used to believe in euthanasia, but I never use it any more. They taught me in the hospital that it was wrong to cut people."

Mimi didn't know what euthanasia was, but she didn't want to show her ignorance. "Oh, it is," she said seriously. "At least unless you have a very good reason." She rose from the easy chair "Well, I just wanted to meet you, Bertie. I never before had such an enthusiastic fan, and I had to know what you were like. I'd better go along now."

"Will I see you again?" he asked.

She pursed her lips. "I think you ought to know, Bertie, that I'm in love with another man."

"Oh, I don't mean to take you out," he said. "I mean just to see you and talk to you. I'm glad you're in love, because that means you're happy, and I wouldn't want you to be unhappy."

"I guess it would be all right just to see you," she conceded. "Why don't you come backstage after tomorrow night's show? I'll tell the stage janitor to let you back."

"Could I?" he asked eagerly. "I won't stay long. I promise I won't be a bother."

Smiling, she moved toward the door. In the doorway she held out her hand and said, "Good night, Bertie."

Instead of merely squeezing her hand, as she expected, he gently raised it to his lips. But it wasn't the gallant gesture of a continental; it was an expression of reverence.

When he dropped her hand, he said in a low voice: "I'd do anything for you. Anything at all."

"Even kill?" she asked lightly.

"Even kill," he said. "If that would make you happy. I couldn't bear to see you unhappy for a minute."

There wasn't much doubt in Mimi's mind that he meant it.

Later, in bed, Mimi carefully thought out just how she would go about using Bertie Snowden. She couldn't just ask him to kill Lucette, for if he confessed to the police afterward that the murder was her suggestion, she would be in as bad a position as if she committed the crime herself. She had to induce him to kill without actually suggesting it, so that she could claim she had no previous intimation of his intention.

Mimi went to work on him the following night, when he appeared backstage after the show Casually she introduced him to the other cast members as a friend, deliberately allowing them to get the impression that he was a little more than that. No one showed any surprise, for it wasn't uncommon for some of the girls to encourage men somewhat old for them, for the gifts they could get out of them.

When he had met the rest of the troupe, Mimi said: "Come along to my dressing room, Bertie, and we can talk while I dress."

Inside the dressing room Mimi closed the door, casually slipped from her robe and hung it up. She would have been just as casual before most visitors, for she wasn't ashamed of nakedness, but tonight she watched for Bertie's reaction from the corner of her eyes.

His expression was openly admiring, but it was the kind of admiration men usually direct at lovely paintings, not the sort a living, beautiful woman expects to arouse. Perversely she was a little resent-

full at his total lack of desire for her as a woman.

She pointed to a chair and Bertie obediently took it. Mimi sat herself at the dressing-table bench with her back to him and began to remove her heavy stage makeup with cold cream.

She said to him in the mirror, "Dave Exeter, the tall man with the wavy hair I introduced you to, is the man I told you I loved, Bertie."

"Oh?" he said interestedly. "When are you going to get married?"

She emitted a bitter laugh. "Never. He's stopped loving me."

"Stopped loving you?" he repeated in a tone of utter disbelief. "How could he?"

"He's going to marry that redhead you met. Lucette Duval."

There was silence from behind her. Mimi glanced in the mirror and saw that Bertie Snowden had a completely dumbfounded look on his face.

"He couldn't possibly want another woman in place of you," he said finally. "No man could."

"Dave does," she said. She studied her face in the mirror to make certain the last of the makeup was off. When she was sure her tears wouldn't leave any unsightly streaks of mascara on her face, she suddenly began to cry. "Oh, Bertie," she said into a piece of Kleenex. "I'm so miserable."

"Don't," he said. "Please don't cry."

He rose from his chair and hovered over her helplessly. Mimi only cried harder.

Without actually touching her, he made ineffectual patting motions in the air near her shoulders. "Please don't cry," he said. "I can't stand to see you unhappy"

"I can't help it," she said in a muffled voice. "I'll never be happy again, Bertie. He's going to marry Lucette. Oh, how I hate her."

"Maybe he won't, Mimi. Maybe something will happen, and he'll come back to you. Please don't cry any more."

Maybe something will happen, she repeated in her mind. Was he already beginning to get the idea?

In case he was, she helped the idea along by sobbing: "No, he won't, Bertie. He'll never come back to me. Not as long as Lucette is alive."

"Then maybe you'll get over him and find another man to love, Mimi. Please don't be unhappy. I can't stand to see you this way."

"I'll never love another man as long as I live," she said with a note of finality. "When Dave and Lucette become man and wife, I'll be miserable for the rest of my life."

He was silent for a long time. She kept her face lowered into the piece of Kleenex, allowing her tears to flow ceaselessly.

Eventually he said in a colorless voice: "Then I guess I'll have to do something about it."

She heard the familiar click of his knife opening, and her heart leaped with elation. She hadn't expected such immediate response. She had meant merely to plant the seed tonight, expecting to have to work on his diseased mind for a period of days, or even weeks. But he was going to hunt down Lucette's dressing room right now, and kill her.

I didn't tell him to, she whispered to herself. *I didn't suggest a thing. Nobody can blame me.*

That was the last thought she ever had.

She should've checked euthanasia, should've realized it was just a big word for mercy-killing. . . .

Conscience Fund

Burglars don't usually break into a place and leave more money than was there originally. That's what puzzled detectives when they were called to the Trinity Episcopal Church, Fort Wayne, Ind., where a vestry window had been broken. A $5 bill which had been on the pastor's desk was still there—along with 80 cents on the floor.

A wet area on the floor was a clue. Detectives learned that some young boys had a snowball fight earlier near the church, and apparently one of the missiles shattered the window accidentally. The guilty boy, conscience-stricken, had tried to make things right.

The Rev. George Wood, pastor, said the 80 cents, probably all the boy had, won't replace the window, but the honesty it represents is priceless.

Tables Turned

In Hitchin, England, Paul Walker, a pedestrian, was fined $73 for colliding with a moving automobile. Walker was running across a street to catch a bus when he smacked into the car. Damage to the car included denting the radiator, breaking a headlight, and damaging the cowl, engine panel and fender. Walker received only a slight arm injury and a bruised hip.

GALEN waited a moment outside the apartment door, listening. He slid his key into the lock and opened the door slowly. He did not actually believe that Mildred would be asleep, but he was thinking how much more pleasant it would be if she were. It would be much easier, he felt, to talk to her in the morning.

Mildred was sitting in the reading chair, the lamp lit behind her, a book on her lap, and he was sure this was how she sat all evening, not reading, not even really caring . . .

She said nothing while Galen hung up his coat in the hall closet. He went across the room swiftly, kissed her on the cheek. She sat quietly looking up at him.

"You took another case—" she said.

He stood there patiently, knowing this was what he had anticipated all evening, why he had come home late.

"You didn't tell Horvig you were through . . ." Mildred said. "After all we talked about—after you said you wouldn't, you went out and took another one of his dirty, stinking jobs . . ."

"The last one—" Galen said.

FLY-BY-NIGHT

The detective agencies couldn't find the girl. Galen Ford had *to find her—no matter how long it took.*

by ROBERT GOLD

Mildred smiled. "You said that before, Galen. You'll be saying it the day you die . . ."

"This is a big one, Milly," Galen said. He lit a cigarette and sat down on the edge of the couch. "Five percent of a hundred and twenty thousand. I couldn't turn it down—"

"What do you have?" Mildred said casually.

"A saloon keeper in Hoboken," Galen said. "Left his money to a niece. I have a picture taken twelve years ago—she was sixteen—and the address of a garage where her father worked."

"Where he worked twelve years ago?" Mildred said.

"Just about," Galen said, knowing what she was coming to.

"You have a picture of a girl who is now a woman," Mildred said. "You have the address of a job her father left twelve years ago—and on this you'll start looking? Three months—six months, and perhaps you will find her and Horvig'll give you six thousand. But it's more likely you won't find her, isn't it? I'll sit here by myself waiting for you to come home with nothing, and we'll be right back where we are right now—only we'll be older . . ."

Galen looked down at his cigarette.

"You know what the worst part is, Galen? It's knowing how you feel when you come home with nothing."

Galen shook his head. "I couldn't quit on a low note, Milly. I couldn't tell Horvig I was through when he would know it was really that I was licked. A man can't quit when he's on the bottom of the pile . . ."

"Is this the way to the top?" Mildred said. "Oh, you've been lucky, Galen. You've found them quickly sometimes—a month, maybe two months, and it would seem like easy money But remember how many times you haven't found them, Galen? How many times you drove a thousand miles—for nothing?"

"I'll find this girl," Galen said.

"Horvig gives the big ones to the agencies first, doesn't he?"

"The agency boys talk to the wrong people," Galen said. "They ask the wrong questions."

"Yes," Mildred said, "the agencies couldn't find her but Galen Ford will. We're getting older You're always on the run, Galen—and you're close to forty . . ."

Galen stood. He was lean, hard-bodied. He didn't feel close to forty. He went into the bedroom, sat on the bed, and pulled the picture from his wallet. He had said no to Horvig. He had kept saying no to Horvig until the lawyer had put the picture in front of him.

Lucille Maury, sixteen years old. The photographer had caught the eyes wide, the lips tight yet smiling. It was the picture of a woman without a woman's years, a picture of things to come.

Mildred stood in the doorway. "You're always running after something, Galen." She made no effort to hide the bitterness now. "It's not the money, it's not even the finding you're after . . . I don't know, I'll never really know, but sometimes I think all you want is to tramp back through the lives of people, to dig into what has gone by them—"

Galen sat looking at the picture.

There was a smell of paint and gasoline in the shop. An air compressor exhaled in rhythmic violence, and in the rear of the garage a hammer stubbornly banged metal.

The service manager shook his head. "Did you try his home address—"

"Nothing there," Galen said.

"Like I said," the man rubbed his chin, "I didn't get here myself until after Maury left. I only know what I remember hearing about the guy. It's been a long time—"

"Twelve years," Galen said. "Why did he leave?"

"He was thrown out for drinking on the job."

"Anybody here now who worked with Maury?" Galen asked.

"Yeah, Frazer," the manager said. "Old man Frazer, you'll find him in the pit . . ."

Frazer was under a car on the lubrication rack. He was stretching to reach the fittings with his grease gun.

"I'm looking for Tom Maury," Galen said.

The old man slung his gun on the axle and wiped his oil-slicked hands slowly over his oil-slicked tunic.

"I haven't heard that name in years," the old man smiled. "You a cop, Mister?"

"No," Galen said, "I'm a friend."

"I could talk better over a drink, Mister," Frazer said. Galen looked back at the manager's booth. "Don't let that bother you, Mister," Frazer grinned. "They don't care. There's no pension plan here—they're just waiting for me to die out of the job . . ."

They went into a shabby bar across the street. They sat at a table, and Galen noticed there was grease film on the plastic seat covers. He waited while the old man had his drink.

"I used to be a better drinker than I am," the old man said, "but I wasn't much compared to Tom Maury."

"A big drinker?" Galen said.

"A good drinker," the old man said. "Oh, he'd get real rowdy when the stuff was in him but none of the meanness you see around liquor . . ."

"He had a daughter?" Galen said.

"Two of them," the old man said. "One was small, ten years old, maybe. You must be thinking about Lucy."

"Must be," Galen said.

"I remember Lucy," the old man fingered his

empty glass, and Galen nodded at the bartender.

"You can't forget a girl like Lucy," the old man shook his head. "Tom was a widower, you know. There was no one to look after him but his Lucy. She was a stick alongside him, but many's the night she'd come for him when he had too much liquor to get himself home. Many's the night I've seen her keep him on his feet as they went down the street home. You never forget a girl like Lucy . . ."

"And Tom Maury drank himself out of a job," Galen said quietly

Frazer looked at him. "You can never know what makes a man drink," the old man said. "I drink now mostly because I can't handle a mechanic's tools anymore. I lost my trade, Mister—and I'm a grease monkey, and they're waiting for me to die on the job because they haven't the guts to throw me out . . ."

"Where did Tom Maury go?" Galen said.

The old man looked into his glass. "I remember the last day he came to the shop," he said slowly. "He was wearing his Sunday suit, and Lucy was with him. Neat as a pin and pretty she was—and you know what I remember best—she looked like she was proud of her daddy. Old Tom Maury, all slicked up and here for his money from the men who canned him for drinking, and there was that bit of a girl who was proud of him ."

The old man finished his drink quickly. "He came to see me. He said he was going west where he could take care of his girls . ."

"Where west?" Galen asked.

"Indianapolis," the old man said.

Galen drove ten hours the second day coming into Indianapolis. He had a safety belt anchored around him into the floorboard. He had it installed because it held him upright in his seat. It was harder to go to sleep sitting that way.

His hotel room faced the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. He stood looking down on the night traffic wheeling around the circle, feeling the weariness pull at his legs. He took the phone book to bed with him and flipped through the pages. There were no Maurys in it. That would have been too easy, he thought, and then he closed his eyes a moment. Lucy Maury's picture persisted in the shadows. Her face faded slowly, overwhelmed by brightness. He opened his eyes, and there was sunlight on the bed.

He had breakfast at the hotel and walked to the telephone company. They let him look through twelve years of phone books. There were no Tom Maurys. He invested five dollars at the city office to find that voters' and tax lists had no Maurys.

He made a listing of garages from the classified directory. It took him a week to visit all of them, to talk to all of the people who might have known Tom Maury—but didn't. He went to the newspaper office and started reading twelve years of obituaries. In three days he read back through eight years of death notices, and then he came to Tom Maury's name.

The mortician—to Galen's unreasonable surprise—was a short, plump, cheerful man.

"Come in, Mr Ford, come in," he said almost happily

He led Galen back through the green lighted mortuary, past septic smelling tanks to a corner which, with a desk, chair, and file, was an office. He pulled down from its cabinet a dust filmed ledger.

"Good thing you have the date, Mr. Ford," the little man said. "I don't file alphabetically ."

The bleached white fingers spread apart the pages.

"Here we are," the little man said happily, "Forty-oh-five Meridian Street . . ."

It was a seedy apartment house in a deteriorating northtown section. There were six mailboxes in the vestibule. None of them said Maury He knocked at all the doors. There was no one who knew Lucille Maury.

Eight years, he stood on the stoop thinking, wondering who would live in this section, in this house eight years. Its owner He went back to the first door and found that the landlady lived in the next house.

She was a stout, sweating, maternal woman.

"Lucy Maury!" she said. "They were with me three—four years, it was—that poor, sweet girl—" She wiped her hands vigorously on her apron.

"You remember Lucy?" Galen said.

"Remember—" the woman shook her head, "you can't help remembering, Mister She used to do a lot for people here, Mister With a twelve-year-old sister to bring up, with that father of hers—she still couldn't do enough for people—errands, sewing—"

"You didn't like Tom Maury?" Galen said.

"He's dead. I don't like to speak of the dead." The plump hands kept drying themselves on the apron. "But a man—with such children—to drink so that he couldn't hold a job—to come home and cry on a sixteen-year-old's lap—"

"How did he die?" Galen said.

"Like he lived—drunk. Right there—" the fleshy arm pointed past his head. "Killed crossing the street in front of his own home . " The hoarse voice seemed indignant. "I'll never forget Lucy running out and holding up his head. I couldn't have done that, Mister Not with all that blood—"

"Where did they go?" Galen said.

"West somewhere," the woman said. "I never knew where."

"Is there someone else who might know?" Galen said. She shook her head.

"Did the girls have any relations?" Galen said.

The plump fingers plucked at the concentrating

lips.

"An aunt, I think—I'm sure, Lucy told me once about an aunt who married a German and moved out west—"

Galen waited, and the anxious face suddenly smiled with relief.

"Lieberman—or Leiderkranz, I think," she said. "Kansas City, Mister . . ."

Galen drove into a parking lot on State Street.

"How long, Mac?" the attendant asked.

Galen looked at his parking ticket. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe a week—maybe a month . . ."

He walked down a block to a diner. There was a neon sign outside that said *Good Food*. It was fair

He sat in the booth stirring his coffee, watching the people on the street beyond the plate glass. She could come walking by—and he might not know her Galen knew he hadn't thought, he hadn't permitted himself to think, how long a way it was that Lucy Maury had gone since she sat for a portrait in Hoboken.

He was through with garages, he had no doorbells to ring. The truth was, Galen knew, he had almost nothing but the knowing that a girl had come to this city eight years ago.

He sat watching the street, watching girls laughing on the street, with school books under their arms. He stood, jerking the table so that the coffee slopped on the linoleum. The cashier called after him as he went out, and he had to come back with the change. He went down the street looking for a cop. The building he wanted was in sight across the square, and the cop on the corner pointed it out to him. Galen walked with long hard steps, feeling the tension that always tightened his stomach when he knew he was going right.

The Registrar of Schools was a small, conservative lady who looked up at him from her desk as if he had come from the moon.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ford," she said; "we do not give out information from our files—"

There were banks of green metal card cases behind her swivel chair His card was in one of those cases. Galen knew the card was there. He pulled Horvig's letter from his wallet, stretched it on the desk. The registrar shook her head back and forth slowly

"That's a lot of money, Mr. Ford . . ."

He nodded.

"Kathy Maury's sister?"

Galen kept nodding. She turned and pulled a file drawer open. He stood there listening to the clock beat on the desk as the fingers ran across the stacked cards. The fingers stopped running, held the card back.

"Eleven-oh-nine Seventh Street," she said.

He was at the door when she called to him.

"I hope you find her, Mr. Ford," she said. "Kathy Maury's card is six years old."

There was a lane of shade trees along the sidewalk of Seventh Street. Behind them sat an aging row of brownstone houses. Galen went up the steps, rang the bell, and waited for Lucy Maury to open the door. A tall, gloomy woman opened the door.

"Is Lucy Maury home?" Galen said.

The woman stared at him, and in the silent, unfriendly face Galen saw that he was lost.

"Lucille left me two years ago," the woman said and stood there watching him.

Galen had been talking to people a long time. He knew that for each man, each woman, there was a key to find—words which would reach them and open the pressure gates. Lucy Maury had lived with this woman, this last link—in whom he could see grief, strength and pride, and for once he wasn't sure of what to say.

"Are you a friend of Lucille's?" the woman said.

"I know something of her," Galen said.

The woman held her hand on the door a long moment, then drew it back.

"Come in, please," she said.

Galen went into the darkened parlor. There were muslin curtains muffling the windows. The air was stale, the furniture old. The house itself seemed old and lifeless.

"I'm Hannah Liebman," the woman said "Lucille and her sister lived here with me."

She turned on a lamplight and sat below its pale glow. Galen looked at the stern face, felt the solemn house around him and tried to imagine Lucy Maury there. He thought there should have remained some hint of laughter, some faint fragrance of youth still lingering.

"My name is Galen Ford," he said softly. "I'm an investigator. I have an important message for Lucy Maury "

"She's gone two years," the woman said. "I don't know where."

"I've come a long way," Galen said. "It's very important—"

"If I knew where, Mr. Ford, I would tell you," the woman said evenly

"I have no doubt of that, Mrs. Liebman," Galen said. "I have looked for many people. I've found them mostly by talking to other people. Some knew and would tell, some knew and wouldn't. Some did not know—but in talking to me, they would tell me pieces of information which in themselves were nothing, but pieces sometimes fell into a pattern and told us both what we could not possibly otherwise know . . ."

They sat motionless in the silent house a moment.

"What do you know of Lucille?" the woman said.

"I've had only glimpses," Galen said. "I've been to Hoboken, to Indianapolis . . ."

"You've been following Lucille twelve years late," the woman said. "It's easier for me to talk to someone who knows of Lucille . .

"They came to me eight years ago," the woman said slowly. "My sister's children, Lucille who was twenty and beautiful—oh, Kathy was pretty, Mr. Ford, and sweet and soft as only a fourteen-year-old could be—but Lucille had the warmth, Lucille was beautiful . . .

"I remember the first time she sat here in this room, telling me what plans they had, what schools Kathy was to go to, how happy they were going to be here—and them with barely a week's rent in their pockets . . ."

The woman shook her head. "The first years were happy, Mr. Ford. I remember that, but jobs were getting fewer Even for a girl like Lucille, jobs were harder to come by. She was a waitress and then she was a salesgirl, and she worked hard because Kathy was going to high school, Kathy was sixteen, and Kathy was to go to college—"

She looked up. "I don't mean to say that Kathy was unfeeling, Mr. Ford. A teen-ager's head can be filled with many things. She hadn't time to wonder where the money was coming from . . . and for all that, she loved Lucille, and Lucille had nothing else in the world to live for . . ."

The woman stopped and thought a moment.

"It's hard to tell where things really start, Mr. Ford. I remember that Lucille's job wasn't enough to pay for things. I couldn't help—I'm a widow, and all I had was this house, Mr Ford. Kathy had to go to school with mended dresses. Kathy had to go to parties without new shoes. Lucille wasn't so happy any more. I guess that's how it started . . .

"Everybody liked Lucille, but she never was much for men, Mr. Ford. Worked too hard, I guess—lived too much for Kathy. Then she started going out with a young man—I won't say his name, it would do no good to say his name . . .

"His family had money, and he spent it. I tried to tell her about him, about what most everybody knew—and she wouldn't listen.

"I remember one night—late, she came home and stood inside the door because I was waiting up for her. Her face was flushed and she looked so happy. 'They're all wrong, Aunt Hannah,' she said. 'I'll hold him—you'll see . . .'

"They announced the wedding," the woman said. "Then, two months before, his family sent him to Europe. A month later Lucille had her baby, and the family said it could have been anybody's . . ."

The house was old and dry and now, Galen felt, chilled to its heart.

"Kathy . . ." he asked.

"The school janitor found her in his tool room," Hannah Liebman said. "She had taken lye . . ."

Two years, Galen thought. The pain had passed this house two years ago. It didn't seem fair he should feel it fresh and cutting now.

"She put the boy in the Wayside Orphanage just before she left," the old woman said. "He's still there—I go to see him."

Galen took the letter from his pocket, laid it on the woman's lap. She read it, and the stiff head suddenly bent, the veined hands clutched the distorted face, and she wept.

Galen asked the hotel operator to call east. He could hear their phone ring—he felt better listening to it ring.

"Hello, Milly—" he said.

He could see her sitting at the phone. The voice brought the face to him. The thin, patient, weary, familiar face. He didn't know when it was that he began to think of Milly as being thin, tired. Maybe he had been away from home too long—too often. Maybe he saw age in a woman the way a man wasn't supposed to see it . .

"Yes, Milly," Galen said. "I'm fine . . . yes, I'm eating . . .

"It's not good, Milly," he said. "There's not too much left."

"You're about ready to come home?" Milly said.

There was nothing for him to say.

"Is that why you called, Galen, you want me to tell you to come home?"

He didn't know. Maybe that was why he had called.

"Maybe I'd like you to come home, Galen," she said, "but you have to finish—it's got to be out of you. It's got to be the last time coming back—I don't want you to come unless you're sure. I don't think you're sure yet, Galen . "

He knew she was right. He thought about it afterward—what she had said was right.

He had a bottle sent up to his room and tried to drink himself to sleep. He couldn't sleep and he couldn't think. There always came a time in some cases when leads led to a wall, the footprints faded in the dust; there was nowhere else to go—and the ideas stopped coming and he couldn't think any more. That was when he would turn the car around and go home.

There is nowhere else to go, he thought, and the night air was hot over him and sickly sweet with the bouquet of whiskey The sheet under him was damp, and he lay on it thinking of Lucy Maury. She was twenty-eight somewhere. She might be dead somewhere, but he lay there in a chilled sweat thinking of a sixteen-year-old's face, his picture's Lucy Maury.

Go home, he thought. There was nothing else to be done, nothing . . . the sun was in his eyes. He had slept and he had dreamt. He lay there trying to recapture the memory of it. He remembered vaguely a maze of signposts, all pointing, all leading noplace . . .

He dressed and drove to Hannah Liebman's house.

"Do you know how much money Lucy had?" he asked her.

"I closed her bank account," Hannah Liebman said. "She had two hundred dollars—maybe a little more."

"How did she like to travel?" Galen said.

"I don't know—she never went anywhere before—"

"How did she come to Kansas City?" Galen said.

"By bus—do you think, Mr. Ford—do you know where . . ."

"No," Galen said. "I don't know, but I'm still looking. I'm going to take one more hard look . . ."

He took his road maps back to his hotel room, aligned the western states and tacked them to the wall. She wouldn't go east, he thought, not backward . . .

He knew what the bus rates were, he knew what she had—but how much would she invest in distance? How much would a girl running put down on the counter for a ticket away?

With a pencil and a string anchored on Kansas City, he drew an arc north-south across the western states. He sat there looking at the cities east and west of his line. He sat two hours looking at the cities, trying to feel what Lucy Maury might have felt as she ran westward with her two hundred dollars. Wherever he looked, he came always back to one. Las Vegas.

Galen came into Las Vegas on Route 93. Daylight was mostly gone but he wanted to check the cops before sleeping.

There were two cops talking to the desk sergeant when Galen came in. They stopped talking.

"I'm looking for a woman named Lucille Maury—" he said. He was going to give the description but he didn't. The three cops were looking at him—he didn't understand the reaction, but he suddenly knew he had her.

The sergeant's face was stiff, angry. "Are you a wise guy, Mister? What the hell are you coming to us for—"

Galen stood rooted, helpless. One of the patrolmen shrugged his shoulders. "Try the doorman at the *Lucky Seven,*" he said, and the three of them stood watching him as he left.

The house had three floors. The stairs creaked as he went up. A dim light burned on the second floor landing. He stood a moment by the door, then knocked softly There was no answering movement, no whisper of life beyond the door, and yet he was certain there was somebody behind it listening, waiting for him to leave.

He knocked again, and now there was a rustle of motion.

"Who is it?" the voice was muffled behind its barrier.

"I'm looking for Lucy Maury," Galen said.

He stood waiting in the humid hall. The back bolt scraped, and the door swung inward.

There was orange lamplight on her face. She stood beyond the doorway, framed by it, and for a moment he had the illusion that this was an enlargment of his picture. The impression faded quickly. The face was that of the girl but the features were modified, each detail reshaped by age and emotion. She wore thick, vivid lipstick, a dress cut deep into the bosom. But it was the face he looked at, the dull, sensual face. Two years, he thought, was it possible in two years . . .

She turned back into the room, sat by the lamplit table. Galen closed the door, held out the letter. She read it, then tossed the paper onto the table. She looked up at Galen.

"Do you know why he left me the money?" She smiled, bitterly alive one brief moment with emotion. "My father learned to drink in his saloon . . ."

There was nothing for him to say. He felt sick. He buttoned his coat.

"Why don't you stay a while . . ." she said slowly.

"You don't need the five dollars now," Galen said knowing there was no point in saying that, unable not to say it.

She sat nodding her head a moment, her hands clenched white.

"All men have the same filthy minds—and what's filthy is that you think everything is for money. You can't imagine a woman lonely—a woman like me lonely Well, I'm lonely, so damn lonely maybe any man . . ."

The head bent, shook back and forth. "What can I do with money now?"

"You can get that boy out of the Wayside home," Galen said.

She looked up. She was seeing him, seeing how he had found her. He was suddenly a link to the time and places she had left. Lucy Maury put her head down on the table and wept.

Galen went down the street, thinking how far he had gone. Almost too far to come back. The night air was cold. He felt the chill deep inside himself.

He reached a drug store on the corner near the *Lucky Seven.* The phone booths were alongside the plate glass window He could see the spinning lights of the casinos down the length of the street. He sat waiting while his operator signalled across a continent of time and space.

He heard Milly's voice.

"Milly, I found her," he said. "Milly, honey, I'm coming home . . ."

The other voice, the strange voice, continued a continent away After a time Galen put the receiver back on its hook. He stood up and walked out of the drug store, going slowly along the street toward his car.

The air was growing cold.

Galen put his hands in his pockets and went on slowly walking.

She wasn't an ordinary woman—and what Lonnie did for her wasn't ordinary either.

THE FAVOR

by TALMAGE POWELL

At first there was only pain. It filled his whole being. It crackled down his nerves and flowed into his muscles. He lay and endured it because there was nothing else to do. He didn't fight it or analyze it. There was this moment of pain and nothing else to Lonnie's way of thinking. No past. No future. Only the present tick of time.

After awhile the pain subsided to a slight degree. He opened his eyes. He was lying in a comfortable bed in a room that was strange to him. It was a room of faded, peeling wallpaper, furnished with a rickety washstand and the bed on which he lay. But to Lonnie it was a very good room, the cleanest he had ever been in.

He wondered briefly how he had gotten here. He remembered sticking the knife in Marti during the teen-age gang rumble in L. A. He hadn't meant to do it. But Marti had got in his way, and there'd been the knife in Lonnie's hand. He recalled, without feeling, the way Marti had looked in the alley, loose, disjointed.

It was Hawkins who'd advised Lonnie to get out of town. "You're in trouble, plenty," Hawkins said. "Marti ain't just another punk." Hawkins paced back and forth before Lonnie. Hawkins had brought Lonnie to his room, and Lonnie sat on the edge of the rumpled bed and considered everything Hawkins said.

"The Panthers'll be after you, Lonnie," Hawkins said.

"I ain't scared of them," Lonnie said.

"Hell, I know that. But look at the spot it puts our boys in. You wouldn't want some of them getting hurt because of you?"

"Nah, Hawkins, you know I wouldn't want that. They're my friends."

"Sure, Lonnie," Hawkins said, laying his hand on Lonnie's beefy shoulder. "You got a screwy way of looking at things. But in your own way you're a right guy That's why I stuck my neck out and took the trouble of getting you here."

"You're my friend, Hawkins," Lonnie said.

"And I'm giving you the best advice. Get out of town. Lay low for awhile. Work on a farm or something."

"You think I should? You really think so?"

"I know so. Otherwise you're going to cause some of your friends to get hurt."

"I wouldn't want that. I like to help my friends. I was trying to help the Spig when Marti got in my way"

"I know, kid. Just do as I say. Here, this'll help you a little." Hawkins opened the bureau drawer and took out a five dollar bill.

Lonnie sat with his hands hanging between his knees and shook his head.

"Take it," Hawkins said.

"Nah, I couldn't. You need it. And I wouldn't have no way of paying it back."

Young, sleek, hard, Hawkins looked at him a moment. "I don't want it paid back. Now take it. Do what I say Hop the first freight out of town."

"All right, Hawkins, if you say so."

"I'm saying so. So long, kid, and good luck."

"Good luck to you," Lonnie said, standing up.

He'd gone down to the freight yards and got into a box car without any trouble. Because things had happened fast, his mind felt confused and tired. He'd closed his eyes and gone to sleep, under some straw far back in the corner.

The train had been in motion when he'd awakened. A big, bearded guy had been bending over him, going through his pockets.

"Hey, you!" Lonnie had said.

The big hobo had hit him hard in the face, smashing the back of his head against the side of the car. From that point on there was no memory.

The door across the room opened, the sound bringing a movement of Lonnie's head.

A girl was standing in the doorway. She looked to Lonnie to be about twenty to twenty five. She was slender and had a nice figure that swelled against her faded cotton print dress, pulled snug about her slim waist with a cracked patent leather belt. Her hair was dark blonde, uneven in its short cut as if she'd done the cutting herself. She wore no makeup, and her face was tanned, not pale like the faces of the girls on Lonnie's street.

"Hello," she said. "Feeling better, I guess."

"Yeah," Lonnie said. "But I got a awful headache."

"I guessed as much," she smiled. "I'll fix you something."

She went away and came back in a few seconds with a glass of water and a couple of pills. She crossed the room, stood beside the bed, and offered the pills on her open palm. "These'll make you feel lots better."

"Thanks," Lonnie said. "You're really a friend."

She smiled. She had even, white teeth. Lonnie forgot the pain, looking at the smile. She was sweet and wonderful and his friend, even if he didn't know her name.

"Anybody would have done as much for you," she said.

"I guess not," Lonnie said. "You could have left me be. Some people would have."

"The people where you came from?"

"Some of them."

"Is that why you were going away?"

"Yeah."

"We guessed you'd been on the freight. We found you in the gravel beside the roadbed."

"We?"

"My husband and me. We run this place here."

"It's a nice place."

"No, it ain't much. A stinking little farm out in the middle of the desert."

She didn't look so bright talking about the farm and that gave Lonnie a moment of brief sadness.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Louise. What's yours?"

He sipped the water to swallow the pills and said, "Lonnie Speare."

"From L. A.?"

"Yeah."

"I'd like to go there sometime. I never been in a city"

"It's all right," Lonnie said.

She put her hand forward and wiped the fine hairs back from Lonnie's brow He closed his eyes. He wished she'd keep doing that for a long time. Her touch was cool and gentle. His heart swelled as he realized how kind she was being to him.

"You're tired," she said. "Rest now. I'll look in on you again when supper's ready."

Lonnie heard her go out and close the door softly. He went to sleep without effort.

He felt much refreshed when he woke. He lay content, a big-framed, fleshy youth regenerating physical power quickly. He threw back the sheet and stood up. He was dressed in his dirty shorts. He padded to the chair near the bed and picked up his jeans. He put them on and stood scratching the matted brown hairs on his chest. He was dizzy for a few seconds; then it passed.

He moved to the washstand and looked at himself in the faded brown mirror that hung on the

wall. Close cut brown hair was like a cap on his head fitted close about his protruding ears. The features of his face were heavy, without visible bone structure. There was a mottled yellow and purple discoloration on his left cheek where the big hobo had struck him.

He turned from the mirror and ran his hand in the pocket of his jeans. Sure enough, the fiver that Hawkins had given him was gone.

"Okay, big fellow," Lonnie muttered under his breath. "I'll remember you. I'll fix you if I ever run across you again."

Moving to the bed, he sat on the edge of it and put on his socks and shoes. He was getting into his shirt when the door opened and a man came into the room.

He was taller than Lonnie, but slender. Slender to the point of looking stooped and hollow chested. His face was narrow with thin, sharp features, his skin rough, flaked from the sun and hot wind. The whites of his slate gray eyes were bloodshot and he brought the smell of whiskey into the room.

"You about ready to eat?"

"Yeah," Lonnie said.

"Well, come on. Louise has got it waiting."

Lonnie buttoned his shirt quickly. "I want to thank you . . ."

"Skip it," the man said. "Louise found you. Wasn't nothing else we could do, except leave you out there for buzzard bait."

Lonnie followed the man out of the room. They entered into the kitchen where Louise was busy at the oil cookstove. There were four chairs about a bare, scarred table, a kitchen cabinet, and an electric refrigerator to complete the furnishings of the kitchen. Through a second doorway Lonnie glimpsed a small living room in which were cramped an old wicker set and straw rug.

"This is Bart Houser, my husband," Louise said.

The tall, slender man grunted and moved around the table.

Lonnie sat down stiffly. Bart had destroyed his feeling of contentment. It was plain that Bart didn't want him here. Bart would have left him for the buzzards, Lonnie guessed. Too bad. People ought to be friends and help each other. It was only right to do things for your friends.

"Give me the bottle, Lou," Bart said.

She turned from the stove, her face clouded. She didn't look as young as she had earlier today when she'd smiled. "Bart, don't you think you've had enough?"

"No, I don't. And I'm big enough to do my own thinking. A man works hard all day, he's entitled to a little relaxation without a she-cat jawing at him. Now give the bottle to me."

Louise opened the cabinet and took out a half full quart bottle of cheap whiskey. She set it on the table.

"Now water," Bart ordered.

Louise moved to the sink and worked the hand pump to bring up a glass of fresh water. She put it on the table beside the whiskey.

"Something's burning on the stove," Bart said. "You gonna burn the supper?"

Louise sprang to the stove. Bart took a pull at the bottle and chased it with water. He set the bottle on the table, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and glanced at Lonnie. "Man works like I do deserves a little waiting on at the end of the day."

Lonnie said nothing. He sat staring without expression at the red death of the desert day outside.

"From L. A.?" Bart said.

"Yeah," Lonnie said.

"What you running from?"

"Bart . . ." Louise said.

"Shut up," Bart said. "I'm talking to him—not you."

"I ain't running from nothing," Lonnie said, keeping his hands under the table because his palms were sweating.

"Then what you doing out here?"

"I got throwed off the train."

"Railroad dick?"

"No. A bozo robbed me, slugged me, threw me off."

"Robbed you?" Bart sneered. "Of what?"

"Bart, please," Louise said. "Can't you see the boy's been through a rough time? I know he's telling the truth. Why don't you leave him alone?"

Bart finished a second long drink. "He's probably got a record a mile long in L. A. Or maybe you're so lonely out here you don't care what kind of riffraff you talk to."

"No, I ain't got a record a mile long," Lonnie said.

"I wasn't talking to you," Bart said. "I was asking her something. Come on, Lou. Why the look? Maybe you think because he's from L. A. he can talk a lot better than your husband?"

"Bart," she said quietly, "you're tired." She glanced at Lonnie. "He isn't always this way. He's a good, hardworking man, really. It's just that we've had troubles and they're getting him down."

Lonnie's throat filled with feeling. She was like an angel, he thought.

Bart laughed without humor. "The very soul of generosity. That's you, Lou. Why don't you give up and go back to Salinas?"

"Quit torturing yourself, Bart."

Bart shoved his chair back. "Oh, the hell with it. I don't want any supper"

He stalked into the other room, the whiskey bottle dangling in his hand. He slammed the door so hard the small frame house shook.

Lonnie sat looking at the closed door Then he turned his head and saw that Louise was crying.

She brushed the back of her hand across her eyes and brought a smile to her lips. "Why don't you tell

me about L. A.? I'm going there someday. See the lights. Eat in the restaurants."

"You'd look real good there," Lonnie said.

"Would I? Well, a woman appreciates compliments—and I thank you."

"You deserve nice things, Louise. You're real pretty."

She looked at him, suddenly serious. Then she wagged a finger. "Don't you forget—I'm a married woman."

"I know," Lonnie said, "and my friend. About the best friend anybody ever had, I guess."

She took fried potatoes from the stove. "How old are you, Lonnie?"

"Twenty two," he said, stretching his age three years. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes you impress me like a serious old man—then again you're like a little kid with the heart swelling inside of him."

"Louise!" Bart shouted from the next room.

"Yes, Bart?"

"Open the door! Or maybe you wouldn't like to. Maybe you're making gaga eyes in there at the railroad bum."

Lonnie felt a quiver pass over his big frame. What a snake this Bart was! He understood nothing. Louise is my friend, Lonnie thought. I'd risk my neck to help her for what she's done for me, but I'd never lay a finger on her.

Never. This thing between him and Louise was so beautiful it stopped the breath in his chest. And across the face of that beauty Bart had thrown sullied words, like mud.

Louise crossed the room and opened the door.

"Eat hearty, L. A.," Bart called. "I'm taking you to the junction tomorrow morning early You can bum a ride from there. I ain't having you eat my hard-earned grub and moon-eye my wife, understand?"

Lonnie half rose from his chair. Louise laid her fingers on his shoulder Her touch was light, delicate, but the most real thing in the world. Lonnie sat down again and began eating in silence.

After supper Bart called Louise into the living room and closed the door. Lonnie washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen. After that there was nothing else of immediate nature he could do for her.

He opened the back door and stepped outside. The short, tense desert twilight was over the face of the land. The solitude and loneliness caused a shudder across Lonnie's shoulders as he walked aimlessly over the fields.

There wasn't another house visible anywhere in the twilight. Nothing moved. Even the very air seemed dead. The whole earth felt empty

But it was not. Back there stood her house, like a small, lost thing. A tiny prison. Worse. A cell. This endless emptiness, this lack of life, this ear-crushing silence was the real prison.

Back in L. A. right now, the lights were beginning to twinkle on. There would be talk and occasional laughter and shouted hellos on the sidewalks. People would be eating in restaurants, rubbing elbows with each other Juke boxes would be playing, and if you were in the know you could slip through the gimmicked window over the alley, through the men's room, across the lobby, down into the theater itself and catch the movie for free at the Bijou.

People, lights, sound. That was life. That was all Lonnie had ever known. This emptiness was a thing of terror, a trap, a suspended moment of death.

And she was out here. The moment never ended for her. While in the midst of life moved women that were not half so pretty or nice or friendly as she was.

A lump came to Lonnie's throat as he thought of the waste. He wondered how she had come to marry Bart and be imprisoned here in the wide circle of death.

Maybe Bart was hiding from something out here. A man must have something pushing him to live in a place like this.

Pain returned to Lonnie's head as he struggled with his thoughts. He was confused. It was too much for him. He shook his head and started back toward the house. He noticed how quickly the twilight was fading, how complete the darkness was over the bluffs in the east. His steps quickened.

He could hear Bart's voice before he stepped again into the house. Bart was cursing, railing at her because of some money she'd spent a week ago.

Lonnie stepped into the kitchen.

He heard her say, "Bart, please . . ."

And then he heard Bart slap her. Lonnie could have taken the blow without feeling it very much. But when she took it, Lonnie flinched.

She cried out softly as Bart slapped her again. Lonnie sucked in his breath as if he'd been hit hard in the stomach. A burning sensation filled his chest.

He had dried the long, thin butcher knife when he'd washed the dishes and put the knife in the wall rack. His hand went out. He took the knife down.

He crossed the kitchen and jerked open the door to the living room.

Bart was standing in the middle of the room taking the last drink from his bottle. He could barely keep on his feet. Louise was half sprawled on the wicker settee, holding her cheek and crying bitterly

Both of them turned toward the noise of Lonnie's sudden entry.

Bart saw the long, shinning length of the butcher knife and his eyes were suddenly, coldly sober. He instinctively backed away from Lonnie and the knife.

Lonnie advanced with a heavy stride, the knife

held at his belt pointing forward.

Bart stood slack-jawed, his knees backed hard against the easy-chair "What do you want?"

"You can't hit her," Lonnie said. "I won't let you hit her anymore." He moved closer to Bart.

"You're crazy!" Bart shouted.

"No. I'm just going to stop you from hitting her again." He came a step closer, the knife now held out from his body.

Louise had stopped crying. She looked with terror from Bart to Lonnie, her eyes wide and staring. She was fascinated by the flashing knife in Lonnie's hand.

"You keep away from me! You got no business interfering. She's my wife; I can do with her like I please!" He was shouting again. The bottle fell from his nerveless hand with a crash, but he didn't even look down.

"You've been keeping her here like she was in prison. I'm just going to stop you, that's all."

Bart was going to say something, but the knife was quicker. The knife slid into him to the hilt in the point of very soft flesh where his chest bones parted to yield to ribs.

Bart toppled without a sound, and Lonnie let out a soft, satisfied breath. A heavy weight seemed to have gone from his chest. He felt good.

And then the bewilderment came to his eyes as Louise leaped up from the settee, her eyes wild, and started screaming.

Lonnie had never heard such screams in all his life, not even in the kind of movies he liked to see. He couldn't understand why she was screaming.

He stood there, trying to explain everything to her. She had saved his neck, and for a friend like that you were compelled to do a favor at every chance. He had done her the highest favor he could think of.

He had given her freedom, but, somehow, she didn't seem happy about it.

Her name was Helen Campbell. She was the picture of health. She was dead.

KITCHEN KILL

A Police Files Novelette

by JONATHAN CRAIG

THE SQUEAL came in during my half of the watch, which automatically put me in charge. Stan Rayder and I followed the usual practice of detective teams in splitting our watch, so that one of us caught squeals for the first half of the watch and the other for the second. Ten minutes earlier and Stan would have been in charge. As it was he acted as my assistant and I was saddled with all the paper work.

I sent Stan to check out a Plymouth while I picked up a sixty-one from the desk officer in the muster room. A sixty-one is a regular Complaint Report Form, which is made out for all squeals. It is brief and undetailed, but it's the key document of all

cases in the department files, and the basis on which everything else is built.

All we knew about the case at this time was that a woman had been asphyxiated by gas, and the address. When we arrived at the apartment building, two radio units were already there. We stationed patrolmen at the front and back entrances and sent a third through the building to tell the tenants to stay in their apartments and out of the halls until we could get to them.

The building was a four-story walkup, and the body was in the one nearest the stairway on the second floor It looked like the kind of accidental death that could happen to almost anyone.

The girl lay on the studio couch, her arms straight down at her sides and one slim ankle crossed over the other, just as if she'd lain down for a nap. She was about nineteen, a small girl with long, beautiful legs and shoulder-length red hair that was not quite dark enough to be called auburn. She wore only a mistlike chemise and high-heeled pumps, and she had died slowly and painlessly, without even having realized that she was in danger

The one-room apartment was small but expensively furnished; and the girl herself looked expensive, from the outsize diamond on her right hand to the hand-stitching on her custom-made pumps. There was hardly any trace of the gas now, and although this was one of the coldest nights we'd had all year, the air in the room was beginning to warm up a little from the body heat of the three people who were there when we arrived.

Two of these were neighboring tenants wearing pajamas and robes. The third was the young man who had discovered the body, a big, bulky-shouldered fellow in his early twenties with glistening black hair and hot black eyes.

When I asked him his name, he said, "Jeff Hutchins," in a preoccupied sort of way, his eyes fixed on the body on the studio couch.

"Let's step out in the hall," I suggested, taking his elbow and motioning with my head at the two neighbor men to precede us.

Hutchins violently jerked his arm free and said belligerently, "Don't go pushing me around, copper!"

"We can talk better out of sight of the body," I said without anger

"I'm not leaving Helen alone," he said. "We can talk right here."

I reached for his elbow again, he jerked it back and started to take a swing at me. I caught his wrist, swung him around, twisted his arm up behind his back and marched him into the hall on tiptoe.

The patrolman I had sent to tell tenants to stay in their apartments was just coming down the stairs. I said to him, "Put this guy in the squad car and stick with him until he cools off. I'll talk to him later"

I shoved Hutchins toward the patrolman. Apparently his tiptoe walk into the hall had already begun to cool him off, for he let the patrolman lead him down the stairs without objection.

2.

A policewoman named Sue Calman and an assistant M.E. came up the steps as the pair went down. I'd asked that a policewoman be sent over as we left the stationhouse, because I already knew then that the corpse was a woman, and female DOA's can be searched only by a policewoman.

Motioning Sue and the assistant M.E. toward the open door of the apartment we had just left, I turned my attention toward the two pajama-and-robe-clad tenants.

Neither could tell me much except that the girl's name was Helen Campbell and that she lived alone. Both men lived on the same floor, and had been awakened by Jeff Hutchins yelling for help. They had run out into the hall at the same time, smelled the gas and had seen Hutchins collapsed in the open doorway to the dead girl's apartment. One had dragged Hutchins into the hall, the other had thrown open windows in the apartment and had turned off the gas. Then he'd started to lift the girl, decided she was dead and left her where she was.

I sent both men back to their apartments; then Stan and I looked up the super All we got from him was a verification that the girl's name was Helen Campbell, that she paid her rent promptly and that she'd never caused a disturbance of any kind.

We went back to the one-room apartment and made a complete search of it while Sue Calman and the assistant M.E. continued to work over the body As I said previously, it looked like the kind of accidental death that could happen to anyone.

But it wasn't. Stan and I found enough during our preliminary search to convince us it was murder

The lab crew arrived before we completed our search, but we were almost through and kept them waiting only about five minutes. When I had told them what I wanted in the way of photographs, I went over to see how Sue Calman and the assistant M.E. were coming.

Sue had completed her search and was writing data down on her search form.

"You find anything, Sue?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Where would I find it? The kid's got on a pair of shoes and a chemise. There's nothing in the shoes but the label, and nothing in the chemise but the girl." She glanced at the body disapprovingly. "As you can see."

"So that's what it is," Stan said. "A chemise. I never saw one before, outside of a store window"

Stan's a tall, studious-looking guy with a brush cut. He has a habitual expression of surprise, but it doesn't mean anything. He stopped being surprised by things a long time ago.

"Women don't wear them much any more," Sue said.

"Too bad," Stan said.

"It's the kind of thing men buy for women as gifts," Sue said. "About all they're good for is to parade around in, or to stick in a drawer somewhere."

The Assistant M.E. closed the girl's eyes and turned to face me. "Pretty," he said. "Just to look at her, you'd say she was the picture of health."

I nodded. "No question about it being the gas?"

"Very little, Pete. The odds would be about a thousand to one. That's where she gets that pink, healthy-looking skin, from the gas. When carbon monoxide combines with the hemoglobin in the red blood cells, it turns the blood a cherry red."

"But it's possible she could have died of something else?"

"It's conceivable, yes. Nothing's ever a hundred per cent certain until after the post-mortem."

"Suppose you were carrying the case," Stan said. "Then what?"

"If I were carrying the case, I'd forget any other possibilities. As I said, it's all but certain she died of asphyxia. Actually, that's a pretty broad term. No matter what one dies of, the real cause of death is always the failure of oxygen to reach the body tissues, particularly the brain."

"How about the time of death?" I asked. "Can you fix it for us?"

He looked at his watch. "It's a few minutes past five A.M. I'd say she hasn't been dead more than a couple of hours. Call it about three o'clock, and you'll be pretty close."

I wrote down the time in my notebook. "How long would it take her to die?" I asked. "I mean, once the gas was on."

He shrugged. "That's hard to tell, Pete. Normally death occurs when about fifty per cent of the red blood cells have been saturated by carbon monoxide. But that doesn't mean too much. You'd have to take into account the cubic feet of air in the room, and the rate of flow of the gas from the burner, and a lot of other things. And then too, if she was under the influence of a narcotic at the time the gas went on, her body wouldn't have required as much oxygen as it would have otherwise, and the saturation might have been as much as eighty per cent. The same thing would have been true if she'd been asleep."

"Any indication she was under the influence of a narcotic?"

"No. There are no needle punctures or anything like that. But that doesn't rule out the possibility. There again, we won't know till I post her."

"How about liquor?"

"Slight trace on the lips. She might have had an ounce, or a gallon. I'll run a test as soon as I get her to Bellevue."

"I think you're going to find out she was stoned," I said.

"Oh? Why so?"

"It figures," I said. "From the way the homicide was set up, she would have had to be."

"I've been pretty busy with her, Pete. I heard you and Stan talking about it, but I really wasn't paying much attention. Just what do you think happened?"

I glance over to where the techs and photographers were still working around the tiny kitchen area. There was a waist-high refrigerator with a two-burner gas plate on top of it, a small gate-leg dining table, and a sink with a food cabinet above it.

"Her killer had a pretty good imagination," I said. "He tried to rig it so it would look as if she'd put a pan of soup on the burner, and then gone to sleep while she waited for it to heat. The soup was supposed to have boiled over and put out the fire, and from then on it would have been just another case of accidental death."

"Did the soup actually put out the fire?"

"Yes. But it also clogged up the jets. It was this real thick minestrone, which is about three-fourths vegetables to begin with."

"I see. But wouldn't the pressure of the gas have forced the stuff off the jets?"

"Sure. But not soon enough to suit our guy."

"Assuming it *was* a guy," Stan put in.

I nodded. "Anyhow, he couldn't wait. When the soup clogged the jets, he tore off a piece of paper towel and wiped the stuff off of them. Not too much of it, you understand; just enough to let the gas out. He was so careful about it that Stan and I looked right at the burner for a couple of minutes before we realized what he'd done."

"We found the paper towel," Stan said. "The guy was so sure of himself that he just wadded it up and stuck it down in the bottom of the garbage. He probably figured nobody could make anything out of a little soup on a towel. He should've looked closer; he'd have seen that he'd picked up a little rust and grease along with the soup."

The Assistant M.E. shook his head. "He couldn't have been very bright, could he?"

"A man's I.Q. hasn't got anything to do with the way he'll act when he's rigging a murder," I said. "If it did, we wouldn't solve as many of them as we do."

"There's more," Stan said. "He got too careful. He laid out a soup bowl and a box of soda crackers on the table, just the way the girl herself would probably have done. But he wasn't taking any chances. He wiped the bowl and the cracker box so clean that there isn't a single print on either one of them. There isn't even a smear. And even if you figured it was possible for the girl to take a clean

bowl and put it on the table without leaving at least a couple of prints, you couldn't get around the cracker box. Think of the number of people who handled it before it ended up on her table."

The Assistant M.E. frowned thoughtfully "I see what you mean. You reason that with the girl passed out on the couch, her killer could have taken all the time he needed to make her death look like an accident."

"He almost made it," Stan said. "He just got a little too cocky, and a little too careful. Trouble is, he got cocky and careful in the wrong places."

"We'll appreciate a fast p.m., doc," I said.

"You'll get it. All right to take the body now?"

"Yes. If you come up with anything, leave a message for us at the squad room."

"Will do," he said.

One of the techs said, "All clear back here, Pete."

Stan and I walked back to the kitchen area. While we'd already examined it, we'd had to go easy for fear of smearing fingerprints. Now that the techs were finished, we gave it a more thorough going over.

3.

The cabinet above the sink contained a sufficient variety of liquor and wines and fancy glasses to stock a small bar; there were even a few kinds of beverages and glasses that I'd never seen before. The refrigerator contained an assortment of limes and oranges and fruit juices, a dozen or so bottles of soda and tonic and ginger ale, a huge orchid in a transparent plastic box, and nothing else. On the table, near the soup bowl and the box of crackers, there was a small bottle of instant coffee and a cup and saucer. Both the bottle of coffee and the china had yielded prints, but the techs had already established the fact that they belonged to the dead girl.

"Nothing interesting except that orchid," Stan said, shutting the refrigerator door. "And even that doesn't mean much. It's been in there at least a week or more. She probably put it in there and forgot it. And besides, it came from one of the biggest florists in New York. They probably sell a couple of hundred of them a day."

I nodded. "Maybe you'd better give the place still another going-over, Stan," I said. "Our boy friend ought to have cooled off by now I'm going down to see what he has to say for himself."

I went down the stairs and out to the Plymouth at the curb, and told the patrolman I'd assigned to keep an eye on Jeff Hutchins that he could go off somewhere and sneak a smoke for himself. Then I climbed into the back seat with the young man.

"I'm Detective Selby, Hutchins," I said. "I'll be in charge of this case from here on in. You think you've calmed down a little by now?"

He seemed to have. He sat slumped in the seat, his eyes fixed broodingly on the hands folded in his lap.

"I'm sorry about that," he said. "I just blew up, that's all. It was just such a hell of a jolt I didn't even know what I was doing."

"Happens all the time," I said. "Suppose you give it another try Let's start with how you happened to find the body "

He let his breath out heavily "We had a late date. For three-thirty I just walked in and found her "

"The door was unlocked?"

"I have keys to both the outside front door and the door to her apartment." He fished in his pocket for a key ring and removed two keys from it. "Here," he said, handing them to me. "Just in case you want to see if they work."

"You say you had a late date," I said. "You mean she was out with somebody else earlier in the evening?"

"Yes. That is, she had a date with somebody earlier I don't know whether she went out with him or not. Maybe he just came over to the apartment."

"All right. Go on."

"She said to make it about three-thirty That's when I got there, at three-thirty."

"Exactly?"

"Yes. I guess I was pretty anxious. I hit it right on the nose."

"How's it happen you didn't buzz her from downstairs?" I asked. "How'd you know the other man wouldn't still be there?"

"I didn't give a damn if he was. If he was still there, she'd just have to get rid of him, that's all."

"You've got a pretty fair temper there, Hutchins."

"Don't get me wrong. I just don't like being pushed around. You're a pretty big man yourself; you know how it is."

"You knock at her door?"

"There's a bell. I started to ring, and then I smelled the gas. I thought I'd never get my key into that damned lock, but I did, and . . . and I saw her lying there on the couch, and all that gas hit me right in the face and I almost keeled over I yanked the door open all the way and ran inside and opened the window, and then I started to drag her out into the hall, but all of a sudden I got so sick to my stomach that all I could do was yell for help and sort of crumple up on the floor "

"You didn't touch anything in the apartment?"

"I never even got within three feet of her That gas turned my stomach inside out, and—"

"I didn't mean just the girl. You touch anything else?"

"No. How could I? I never had a chance. A couple of guys in pajamas came rushing in, and one of them dragged me out in the hall. I tried to yell to the other one to do the same thing with Helen,

but he went all to pieces. Just kept running back and forth like an old woman. The guy that dragged me out started back for her, but the gas was almost all gone by then, and he said he thought she was dead and that it'd be better not to touch her until the police came."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing. I was still too sick to move, and I guess nobody else could think of anything to do. But somebody must have called for the cops or an ambulance, because you guys started pouring in there only a couple or three minutes after that guy dragged me out in the hall."

"How's your stomach feel now?"

"Physically I'm okay; it's my nerves that's giving me fits." Suddenly he covered his face with his hands and shook his head slowly from side to side. "Why would she do it?" he said. "She had everything. She was so damn beautiful and all—why would she kill herself?"

"What makes you think she killed herself?" I asked.

He glanced up at me sharply. "You mean she didn't? It was an accident?"

There are times when you can't tell whether you're dealing with a killer, or with a guy with a broken heart, and sometimes it's tough to know just how to play it. But you have to play it one way or the other; there's nothing in between.

"You think you could take another jolt?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"It wasn't any accident, Hutchins. She was murdered." I was watching his face closely for reaction, but it showed me nothing I wouldn't normally expect to see.

"Murdered?" he said, his voice barely audible. "Helen was murdered?"

I nodded. "And rigged to look like an accident."

He moistened his lips, his eyes wide. "Murdered," he whispered. "Helen was murdered . . ."

I leaned back and lit a cigar and studied him in the pale flat light of the early dawn. Hutchins' shoulders shook, as if he'd just become aware of how cold it was.

"I was crazy about her," he said, almost matter-of-factly. "I didn't kill her, Selby. I couldn't have. I couldn't even have touched her, no matter what she'd done."

"Somebody did," I said. "Maybe you can help us find out who it was. But first we have to start with you. After all, you're the one who found her." I paused. "You say you got here at three-thirty. Where were you before then?"

"I was home."

"For how long?"

"All night. I mean from about eight o'clock on, till I left for here."

"Can you prove it?"

"How could I prove it? I live alone, in a brownstone. I read until about eleven, and then I set the alarm for three and went to sleep."

"You didn't see or talk to anybody between eight and the time you got here?"

"No. Listen, Selby, I know how you guys think, but—"

"Take it easy," I said. "You don't know how we think. Just concentrate on giving me a picture of this girl. You know of any enemies she had? Can you think of anyone who might have killed her?"

He was silent for a long time. "No," he said at last.

"She ever mention any threats?"

"No."

"Not even any arguments with anyone?"

"Well, not arguments exactly. She and Betty had a few words once, before Betty moved out. But it didn't amount to anything."

"Betty?"

"Betty Dolan. She used to be Helen's roommate, but she moved out a couple of weeks ago. No; it's been longer. About a month."

"Why?"

"Oh . . . Well, I guess you'd say it was over me. I used to go with Betty, see. And then, when Helen moved in—well, I guess I just couldn't help myself. I'd never seen anybody so beautiful in my whole life."

I asked him for Betty Nolan's address and wrote it in my notebook. "Anyone else?" I asked.

"No. And if you think Betty did it, you're crazy. She just isn't the type."

"They never are," I said. "What'd Helen do for a living, Hutchins?"

"Nothing. She had some kind of private income. It wasn't any fortune, but she didn't have to work. I think her folks left her some dough in trust or something."

"She have any family? We'll want to notify the next of kin."

"No family That much I know for sure."

"You know the name of this man she had a date with last night—the one she expected to be with up until about three-thirty?"

"She didn't say But I think it might have been somebody named Charles Grantson."

"You don't know him?"

"No. But she's been seeing him quite a bit."

"What'd she tell you about him?"

"Not much. Somehow I got the impression he's married, but that's just about all. She never talked much about anybody. Oh, she mentioned this Ted Joyner now and then, but—"

"Who's he?"

"Some guy that used to be in vaudeville or radio or something. I never did get it straight. Anyhow, she'd known him a long time, from the way she talked."

I knocked the ash off my cigar "Think hard, Hutchins," I said. "The more you tell us, the easier it's going to be—for all of us."

"I know," he said quietly "My God, I know."

I talked to him another ten minutes without learning anything more of importance; then I called the patrolman back to the car and went upstairs again to use the phone.

My first call was to the Bureau of Criminal Identification to ask for checks on Helen Campbell, Jeff Hutchins, Betty Dolan, Charles Grantson, and Ted Joyner. Then, while I waited for BCI to complete its search and call me back, I phoned the squad room to report Stan's and my progress to the squad commander and to ask whether there had been any arrests or unusual happenings that might possibly have a bearing on our investigation. There had been no developments of any interest; and a few moments after I hung up BCI called back to report that there was no criminal record on any of the people I had asked about, and that no information had ever been filed on any of them.

I located the addresses of Charles Grantson and Ted Joyner in the dead girl's personal telephone directory and entered them in my notebook beneath the address Jeff Hutchins had given me for Betty Dolan. Then, after leaving Stan Rayder in charge of the investigation at the apartment, I took Jeff Hutchins to the Twentieth Precinct stationhouse, booked him as a material witness, and set out to question Grantson, Joyner, and Betty Dolan, in that order.

4.

Charles Grantson, already a very warm suspect, turned into an even warmer one when I learned that he and his wife had checked out of their hotel at two A.M. Grantson had left no forwarding address, and the desk clerk told me that he and his wife had seemed to be extremely upset about something. The clerk was able to tell me nothing more about them than they were both attractive people in their late fifties, and that Grantson appeared to have a great deal of money. Grantson's description, as given to me by the clerk, was that of a tall, slightly stout man with graying hair and very piercing blue eyes. After I had checked with the bellhop who had helped the Grantsons pack, and with the attendant at the garage where Grantson kept his Cadillac, I gathered from the remarks passed between Grantson and his wife that they had been planning to leave the city.

I called Communications, gave them Grantson's description and license number, and asked that he be picked up for questioning. The alarm would be broadcast throughout thirteen states and the District of Columbia, and relayed to every station, post and precinct in the city, including a call to Stan and the other police at Helen Campbell's apartment.

There was, at the moment, nothing more I could do about Mr. Grantson. I went out to the Plymouth and drove over to see Ted Joyner.

5.

Joyner turned out to be a small, stooped man of about forty-five with thinning blond hair and alert gray eyes behind shell-rimmed glasses. His apartment was furnished with an eye to bachelor comfort, and against the wall opposite the hall door was one of the most intricate-looking hi-fi outfits I had ever seen.

His expression changed but little when I told him of Helen's death, but I got the impression that he was making an intense effort to mask his emotions. He was silent for a long moment, and then sank down on the sectional sofa and rested his elbows on his knees, his face almost completely blank.

"A waste," he said. "Such a terrible, terrible waste."

"What was your relationship with her, Mr. Joyner?"

"If you're implying what I think you're implying, I suggest you speak with my doctor. He'll tell you my health has been so poor these last few years that . . ." He shrugged. "We were friends. Nothing more. I met her when she first came to New York. You may have heard me on the radio, even in these days of television. I'm one of the original disc jockeys, you know."

I didn't, but I nodded anyhow.

"I still manage to hang on. A relic of a happier day, you might say "

"You meet Helen through your work, Mr. Joyner?"

"Yes. When her parents died a couple of years ago, she came to New York. It was an old, old story. She wanted to break into entertainment. She was willing to do anything. She had beauty, but no talent. Finally she began making the rounds of the studios, trying to find office work of some kind, even as a messenger It happens I receive a great deal of correspondence, and I hired her to help me with it."

"Was she still working for you?"

"No. She quit after about four months. I understood she came into some money, but she was never very explicit about it."

"But you continued to see her?"

"Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she continued to see me. She was, after all, a very young girl, and her parents were dead. I was extremely fond of her, and I suppose she sensed it, the way girls will, and felt that I was someone to come to when she was troubled or perplexed. I don't much relish the idea of being a father-image, or surrogate, or whatever, but I guess that's exactly what I was."

"When's the last time you saw her, Mr. Joyner?"

"About—well, I'd say about a month. Perhaps six weeks."

"She have any particular problem at that time? Anything that might have a bearing on her death?"

"No. That is, nothing at all serious. She seemed to be having a little trouble with her roommate over some young man, but I'm sure that—"

"She give you the details?"

"No. She merely said that her roommate's young man was showing a lot of interest in her, and that her roommate didn't like it. Betty something-or-other I understood she was quite bitter about it."

"You know a man named Charles Grantson?"

"Grantson? Charles Grantson. . No, I don't think I do." He paused. "Such a terrible waste. Helen was only nineteen, you know A mere baby."

Another half-hour with Ted Joyner bought me no more than I knew already I arranged for a police cruiser to take him to the Bellevue morgue for an official identification of Helen's body, and then I left to question her ex-roommate, Betty Dolan.

6.

Betty lived in a small, shabby sleeping room on the third floor of a rundown brownstone. The air had an unwashed, spilled-whiskey smell, and neither the room nor the girl appeared to have been cleaned up in some time. But despite her disheveled, lackluster blonde hair and a face that was obviously in need of a little soap and water, Betty Dolan was a strikingly beautiful girl. She had dark green eyes and tiny facial features, and the body beneath the soiled yellow wrapper was small-waisted and lushly curved.

"So Helen's dead," she said, her voice caressing the words. "Well, wonderful. It couldn't have happened to a bitchier girl." She sank down on the rumpled bed, reached beneath it for the fifth of whiskey that sat on the floor, and tilted the bottle to her lips. "That's the first honest-to-God good news I've had this winter " She put the bottle back on the floor, brushed the dull yellow hair back from her forehead and eyed me narrowly "So?"

"I understand you and she had some pretty hot words."

"Damn right we did. I got her told, and told hard. The red-haired slut cut me out with my boy friend."

"With Jeff Hutchins?"

"Yeah. With Jeff. God damn him. God damn *all* of them. They'll do you dirty every time."

"When's the last time you saw Helen?"

"Four or five weeks ago. When I moved out on her Why? You think I'd be nuts enough to kill her over a bastard like Jeff? I'm glad she's dead, sure. Look, I'm laughing out loud. But if you think I killed her, you got rocks, boy " She reached for the bottle again, then changed her mind and sat staring at me for a long moment. "It's Jeff you want," she said. "She had it coming and he gave it to her. Now if only somebody would give the same thing to him, I could die happy."

"What makes you think it was Jeff?"

"Because she ditched him for somebody else. She gave him the same brush he gave me. He's a natural-born flip, that Jeff. He just couldn't take it."

"Who was the other man?"

"Some old character named Charles Grantson. A goaty old joker with half a million bucks and a wife with a face that would bust a clock. Helen had been playing him for a long time, but she didn't give Jeff the bad news till the guy said he was going to divorce his wife and marry Helen. Naturally a guy like Jeff Hutchins doesn't stack up against any half a million coconuts, so Jeff got his little pink slip."

I determined that Betty had no alibi for the time in question, told her to keep herself available until she heard from me again, and then drove back to the stationhouse for another talk with Jeff Hutchins. Either Betty Dolan had been lying, or Jeff had been holding out on me, and I meant to find out which.

7.

In the squad room again, I found a message on my call spike to phone Stan Rayder at Helen Campbell's apartment. I called him, and learned that Charles Grantson had come to the apartment and that Stan had taken him into custody. He had told Stan that he had seen Helen the night before, had drunk with her in the apartment until about eleven o'clock, and had then gone home to his wife. He and Helen had argued about Grantson's decision not to divorce his wife after all, and Helen had threatened to tell Mrs. Grantson of their affair unless Grantson came up with a considerable sum of money Grantson, so he said, had refused, and had thought he might escape further trouble with Helen by getting his wife out of town immediately He had therefore told his wife that they had to leave for Florida at once, to take care of an emergency connected with one of Grantson's business interests there, and that it would be well to leave in the early morning hours in order to avoid the heavy traffic of the metropolitan area. Mrs. Grantson had been reluctant to go on such short notice, but she had finally agreed, and they had started south. However, once Grantson had had time to think things out a little more clearly, he had decided to return to New York, have another talk with Helen, and if possible get her to accept a lesser sum for her silence.

I didn't think much of Grantson's story, and I told Stan to keep him in custody until I had finished talking to Jeff Hutchins, at which time I would go to Helen Campbell's apartment and interrogate Grantson at length.

My second talk with Jeff Hutchins was a waste of time. He had once again become surly and uncooperative, and beyond insisting upon his innocence and calling Betty Dolan a liar, he refused to say anything at all. Finally I gave up, turned him over to the squad commander for further questioning, and headed for the dead girl's apartment.

I never reached it. On the way, I stopped for a sandwich and a cup of coffee; and because of that stop I came to realize something that should have occurred to both Stan and me the first moment we looked into Helen Campbell's food cabinet and refrigerator.

I had bolted half the sandwich and was taking a last sip of the coffee when I suddenly found myself reflecting on the fact that, barring oranges and limes, neither the cabinet nor the refrigerator had contained any food of any kind whatever. Liquor and mixer, yes—and a great deal of it. But no food. The oranges and limes had undoubtedly been meant as ingredients and trimmings for mixed drinks, not as food. There hadn't even been a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk. And now that my thinking processes had finally become unfrozen, I recalled that the only cooking utensil she had possessed had been the small stewpan which she had obviously used to heat water for instant coffee.

And if Helen never cooked anything at home—never even kept so much as a single slice of bread or a single pat of butter—how had she happened to have a can of minestrone and a full box of soda crackers?

It was, of course, still possible that she *had* just happened to have them on hand. But I didn't think so. I thought the chances were more than good that the soup and crackers had been bought and taken to her apartment for the express purpose of rigging a murder to look like a suicide.

And I reasoned further that, since the soup and crackers would have been bought at an hour when all the grocery stores and most of the delicatessens were closed, the number of places where such a purchase could have been made were few and the probability of the customer's being remembered were good.

I decided that Helen's killer would have been in a hurry, and that he would have bought his necessities at the nearest possible place.

The nearest possible place to the girl's apartment house was a hole-in-the-wall delicatessen. The proprietor told me he closed at ten P.M., that he had sold no minestrone the previous evening, and that the only delicatessen he knew of that remained open after ten was on a side street two blocks away.

I drove there—and learned the identity of Helen Campbell's killer. The proprietor had sold a can of soup and a box of crackers at about twelve-thirty the previous night, and the description he gave me of the purchaser could have belonged to none other than Ted Joyner, the radio disc jockey for whom Helen had worked for a few months when she had been trying to break into the entertainment field.

I phoned Stan Rayder to tell him I would pick him up outside Helen's apartment house in three minutes.

Half an hour later Ted Joyner motioned Stan and me to seats on the sectional sofa and sat down in a deep leather chair across from us. He looked very small sitting there, and somehow very sick and very old. The gray eyes behind the shell-rimmed glasses looked less alert, less alive.

"Well?" he said softly. "Well, gentlemen?"

"Did you have your own keys, Mr. Joyner?" I asked.

"Keys?"

"To Helen's apartment. We were wondering how you got in."

He shook his head slowly, trying to smile questioningly without quite being able to bring it off. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It's just a matter of time," I said. "You can make things a lot more pleasant for yourself if you don't prolong this."

"I still don't under—"

"We have witnesses, Mr. Joyner. Three of them. An old man who couldn't sleep. He saw you go into Helen's building. And two kids. They were in the back seat of a car, where they shouldn't have been. The cop on post gave them a reading-out. This morning, when he heard about the murder, he remembered the kids. We've just talked to them. They were having their fun right across the street from Helen's building. They saw you too, Joyner."

Joyner's face was gray. He stared at me unblinkingly.

"So much for the witnesses," I said. "But we have more." The witnesses had gone down better than I had expected, considering that I had invented them on the spur of the moment. I had, of course, needed a little extra shock insurance to go with the knowledge we actually had. "We know when and where you bought the soup and crackers," I said. "We know exactly how you rigged Helen's murder, Joyner. We've got everything we need, and we know everything we want to know—except why."

Joyner sat so still, so completely without expression, that it was hard to believe he was still alive. A full minute passed, then another, and slowly his eyes clouded and grew moist.

"I gave her everything," he said, his voice so low that Stan and I had to lean forward to hear him. "I loved her from the first moment I saw her. I gave her a job, and when she got tired of working I

kept right on paying her—every dollar I could. I—I liked to buy her nice things. She was just like some kind of beautiful doll, and I liked to dress her up and show her things to make her laugh."

Stan started to say something but I caught his eye and shook my head.

"I never cared for anyone before. I was afraid to give love because I feared I'd be laughed at . . . I was afraid I'd be hurt. But I loved Helen. She was all the world to me. Nothing else mattered at all. And then, when she met this man—this Charles Grantson—she threw me away as if I were filth. She wanted to marry Grantson, to marry his money. She didn't want me around any longer. She said she couldn't stand the sight of me."

He was silent for several moments. At last I said, "Go on, Mr. Joyner."

"What is there to say? I decided that if I couldn't keep her for my own, no one else would ever have her at all. I went over to her apartment to plead with her one last time. I could see the light under her door, and when she didn't let me in, I thought it was because she didn't want to see me. I let myself in. She—she was on the couch, passed out, the way she had been so many times lately I sat there holding her in my arms for a long, long time . . . and at last I knew what I had to do."

"Had to?" I asked gently.

He nodded. "Yes. Helen belonged to me. I couldn't have borne it knowing she belonged to somebody else."

I glanced at Stan and then walked to the phone to arrange for the immediate release of Jeff Hutchins and Charles Grantson.

As I waited for someone to answer the phone in the squad room I heard Joyner sobbing softly.

"Can't you understand, Officer?" he said to Stan. "Can't you understand that I had to?"

Holdup Handicaps

When a bandit displayed a gun and ordered Mrs. Ethel Steel, 20, waitress in a Columbus, O., restaurant, to open the cash register, she looked him right in the eye and said, "You're kidding." The gunman clicked his apparently empty revolver several times, glanced at another male customer seated down the counter and said: "I guess you're right." Then he walked out.

And in Kokomo, Ind., Jane Weber, a supermarket cashier, wanted to faint when a bandit confronted her. But she couldn't. Then she quickly decided she could at least pretend to faint. As she apparently collapsed, the gunman fled without any loot.

Futility Dept.

What they say about Southern California motorists must be true. In Pasadena the Sertoma Club recently ended a month-long search for a courteous driver during the organization's annual safety campaign. The club admitted failure after a staff of 428 men, aided by 150 policemen, could not find a driver who qualified for the award.

Double Trouble

In Ft. Worth, Tex., burglars gave J. E. Curtis, a night club owner, a rough time. They not only took $2,600 from his safe, but jammed its door so that he had to call in a locksmith to find out if he had been robbed.

Smelling Solutions

New York City police chased and caught a burglar who had broken into a delicatessen and made off with a load of Roquefort, Limburger and Liederkranz cheeses. It was not difficult, they explained, since they could smell their man a block away.

In Chestertown, Md., the odor of pickles led to the arrest of a man charged with robbing a jewelry store. Howard Hadaway, police chief, found a cap and jacket in the building which housed the jewelry store. The clothing had the odor of pickles. Hadaway followed his nose to a nearby pickle packing plant and checked the employees. The suspect was found at work with some of the loot in his possession.

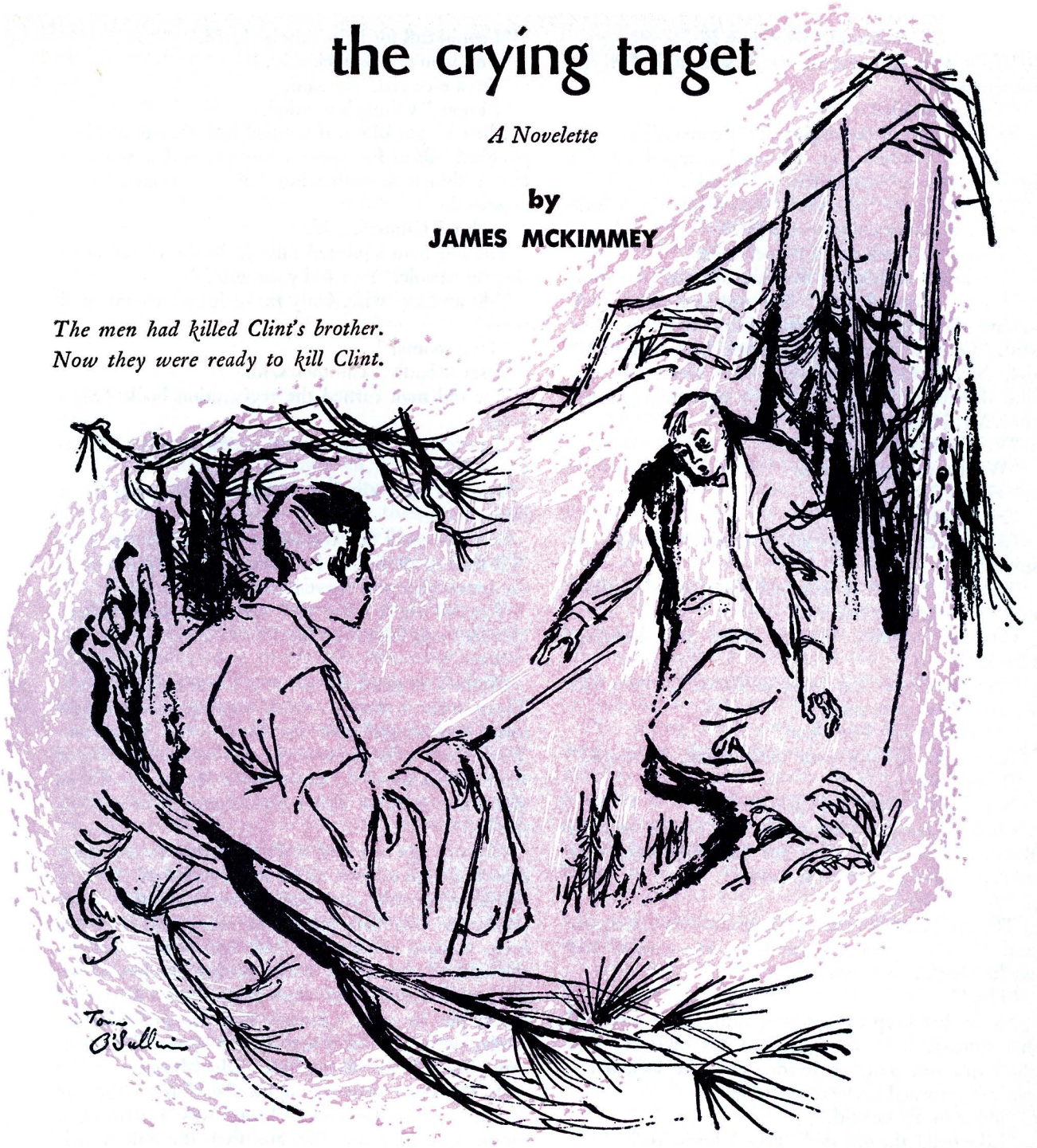
the crying target

A Novelette

by

JAMES MCKIMMEY

The men had killed Clint's brother.
Now they were ready to kill Clint.



CLINTOCK saw the lights coming up fast in the rear view mirror, and a moment later the yellow convertible that had been in front of the roadhouse he'd just left was speeding past him. A hundred yards up the highway the convertible suddenly swayed across the road, then, brakes squealing, ran onto the shoulder and skidded to a stop, bumper resting against a white guard fence.

Clintock, his foot already on the brake, eased his blue sedan behind the convertible, and stopped. He got out and trotted forward. He opened the convertible door, letting the interior lights shine on the face of a pretty blond girl. It was the same girl he'd seen in the roadhouse.

The girl smiled crookedly. "I just about fixed it, didn't I?"

"You just about did," Clintock said.

"Never drink when you drive," she slurred. "Never drive when you drink."

"You don't believe in slogans, I take it."

Clintock stood there, examining her. She was in her mid-twenties, well dressed; she had a nice tan and good shapely legs. Her teeth, behind the limp smile, were small, white and even.

"Well," Clintock said, "what now?"

"Now you can excuse me," she said. "I'll be moving on."

Clintock nodded.

The girl started the engine of the convertible.

Clintock reached past her and snapped off the ignition switch. "You've had it," he said.

"You think so?" she said. "You think I'm a little tipsy? The man's a doctor, maybe."

"Where do you live?" Clintock asked.

"We know each other five seconds, and you want to know where I live." She put her head back against the seat and laughed softly "Look up," she said. "Look at the beautiful stars. Isn't it a pretty sky, Mr. Doctor? And—ohh—the trees! Do you like the trees? These are pretty mountains, aren't they, Mr. Doctor?"

"Very pretty," Clintock said.

"What town are we in, sir?" the girl asked.

"Tourey "

"Never heard of it."

Clintock examined the girl carefully. "What's your name?"

The girl looked at him sideways, giggled, then said, "Carol. Carol Adams."

Clintock nodded. "Where were you heading, Carol?"

"San Francisco. I've been in Reno. Do you like Reno—what's your name?"

"Clintock. I like Reno fine."

"Clintock. What's your first name, Clintock?"

"I never use it."

"Clint, then. Good old Clint!"

Clintock nodded once more. "So you've been in Reno, and you're heading for San Francisco, only you aren't going to make it, honey."

"You bet I will."

The girl bent forward to the ignition switch again, and Clintock removed the keys. He turned and walked back to his own car.

"Hey!"

He let her keep calling after him, as he removed his suitcase from the trunk of his own car and the extra suit hanging inside. Then he locked the car and returned to the convertible.

"Move over," he said.

"Like hell," the girl said. "I don't know you."

"Gently now," Clintock said, "or maybe I'll have to get tough."

The girl looked, then smiled. "Good old Clint. I can trust old Clint, can't I?"

"Move," Clintock said softly.

"Sure," the girl said. "Okay, Clint."

She moved across the seat, and Clintock loaded his bag and suit into the back of the convertible, then got behind the wheel. He made a U turn, and headed back up the lower mountain grade, toward the small town of Tourey A motel sign showed ahead, and Clintock pulled in front of the office. Once more he removed the keys from the ignition.

"I could call for help," the girl said.

"You won't," Clintock said.

"I'm a nice girl," she said.

"I know," Clintock nodded.

Then he got out and walked into the small pine-panelled office. He rang a buzzer, and a moment later a thin man with white hair and veined hands appeared.

"Cabin," Clintock said.

The old man squinted outside in the direction of the convertible. "You and your wife?"

"Me and my wife. Only make it two rooms, will you?"

"Two rooms?"

"I snore badly," Clintock said.

The old man turned the registration book. "Sign here."

"I never can remember the license number," Clintock said.

The old man clucked. "Most people can't. It's a funny thing."

Clintock paid for the cabin, picked up the key. "I'll find it all right," he said. And he returned to the convertible and drove into the court.

"I'm all right," the girl said in a small voice. "Really I am, Clint. I'm fine."

"Sure."

Clintock stopped the car and examined the court. There were a dozen cabins, varying in size. The court was shaped like the inside of a horseshoe. Two cabins were lighted, the rest were dark. There were cars in six of the stalls beside the cabins. There was a car with no lights parked at the far end of the U.

Clintock got out and walked around to the other side. His steps echoed, as his shoes crunched through the loose gravel, and then there came the sharp crack, the firey flare out of the corners of his eyes, back, toward where the dark car was parked at the end of the U. A bullet whined inches above Clintock's head, and then there was a second crack, but by then, Clintock had dropped, instinctively, swiftly. He slid toward the convertible, jamming himself close to the front right wheel.

At the same moment, lights flared from the car at the end of the court. There was a roar of a motor, springing into life, and then the wild shriek of wheels sliding against gravel. A moment later, the car careened out of the court and disappeared.

Clintock stood up, staring after it. Lights had sprung on now in other cabins, and from the office, running stiffly, came the old man.

"What's going on? What happened!"

"Nothing," Clintock said.

"There were shots," the old man said.

"Backfiring," Clintock said. "Kids. They were parked at the end of the court."

"I'll have the police on them, disturbing folks that way!" the old man exploded. "I run a decent place." He faced those seven or eight people who

had come from their cabins. "I run a real decent place here! Disturbing folks like that! I'll put the police on them."

"Too late," Clintock said.

The old man returned grumbling to his office, while the others retreated slowly Clintock looked inside the convertible; the girl's face was half shadowed, her eyes, only, revealed in the light from over the cabin doorway.

"Let's go," Clintock said.

He kept looking at her eyes carefully. She rolled her head back against the seat. "Noise and everything. So sleepy, old Clint. Gonna sleep right here."

"Move," Clintock said tightly.

He half carried her inside, and she clung to his arm.

"Okay," he said wearily.

And he lifted her entirely then, and carried her to a bed. The cabin was split into two sections. There was an open door between them. The girl turned on her stomach, facing away from Clintock.

"So sleepy, old Clint. You're a nice guy, aren't you, Clint? I'm a nice girl—"

Clintock looked the length of her body She had a firm, young body, wide-shouldered, and full-hipped without being overly full. She wore a good expensive suit, and the stockings were carefully put on, seams exactly straight.

Clintock bent over her, then gently drew a blanket around her. Her purse lay beside her, and he picked it up. He turned toward the lamp and noiselessly unsnapped the purse. He went through the contents slowly and deliberately, replacing each item without change of expression.

Then he opened the small wallet. There was a twenty dollar bill, two tens and four ones. There was her driver's license, an identification card. Her home was San Francisco.

Clintock opened the coin section of the wallet. There were three pennies, a nickel and a dime, and a small worn bronze medal.

Clintock's forehead furrowed. He held the bronze medal up, turning it against the light from the lamp. He wiped a hand lightly across his forehead, and then returned the medal, then the wallet, to the purse, and placed the purse on a bureau.

He turned finally, walked outside and got his bag and suit from the convertible. He looked in the trunk then, and took out the small bag there. He brought that inside, and placed it on a chair beside the bed where the girl slept. He opened it and riffled through it quickly. Then he walked into the other room, closing the door behind him.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, face drawn, heavy shoulders sagging. He unbuttoned his jacket, and removed the gun, a .38 caliber Colt Cobra, from his shoulder holster, running fingers carefully along the barrel. He shivered perceptibly, and then he lay back, looking up at the ceiling, eyes wide, flecked with hate.

2.

The cabin lay in the morning shadow of the mountain. The air was clean and not yet warmed by a sun just starting over the range to the east; smoke curled up from the brick chimney running up the side of the cabin, flavoring the early morning air with the scent of burning fir

The cabin was large, a rambling-looking structure of rough, unfinished timber. A small creek ran down in back of it. In front were two large automobiles. The clearing in which the cabin rested was surrounded heavily by tall pine and thick, morning-damp bushes. A single dirt road curled away, leading to an invisible blacktop, which, in turn, wound two miles to the town of Tourey, nestling along the lower upgrade of the Sierra Nevadas.

Inside the cabin, in the yellow pine-panelled main room, a thin, hard muscled young man with glistening black hair, sat in a wicker chair, feet up and resting on a thick plank table; the entire room was furnished with heavy informal items; there was a head of a spike buck above the large fireplace; there was a shotgun with a carved stock resting on pegs on the opposite wall.

The young man with the black hair lifted a bottle from the table and splashed an inch of whiskey into a water glass. At the same moment, from the entry leading to the kitchen beyond, came a short man with a thick body and surprisingly broad shoulders, intensified by the shortness of his heavy arms. He wore a dark felt hat which was pushed up and back, faintly indicating the baldness underneath. He was munching a thick ham sandwich.

"What are you trying to do, Jack?" he said to the younger man. "Drink yourself dumb or something?"

"Hell," Jack said. "Drink myself dumb! I had two drinks!"

"You ought to eat something. Nick don't like it if you drink too much. You know that. This ain't a time to get Nick any madder "

The older man's voice was surprisingly high-pitched, soft and whispery

Jack, the younger of them, removed his feet from the table, stood up, took off the jacket of his sky blue suit, and hung it over the back of his chair He wore a black shoulder holster; there was a Luger inside it. He sat down once more, lifted his feet to the table, then squinted at his black, heavy-heeled shoes. He got a handkerchief from a rear pocket and wiped the shoes carefully, then replaced the handkerchief in the pocket.

"What's Nick doing in there?" he asked the other man.

"Who knows?"

"Hell," Jack said, disgruntled, and he drank some of the whiskey from the water glass.

Al sat down beside the table. "How's the fire doing, Jack?"

Jack nodded.

"You warm enough, Jack?" Al asked.

"Hell, yes," Jack said disinterestedly.

"Cold up here in the mornings."

"Drink some goddamn whiskey," Jack said. "You won't be cold."

"I didn't say I was cold," Al said. "I said it was cold up here. I meant it gets cold outside. It ain't cold in here, is it, Jack? Are you warm enough?"

"I said I was," Jack said angrily.

Al finished his sandwich and wiped his mouth with his hand. "That's good ham, Jack. You ought to try it. You oughtn't to drink too much, Jack."

"You want to fix me a sandwich, I'll eat it," Jack said. "Otherwise, shut up, heh?"

Al leaned on his elbows, looking at Jack worriedly. "Now don't get mad, Jack. You really want a sandwich, I'll fix it—."

But just then a tall rangy man in his mid-thirties appeared from a bedroom near the back of the main room. He was in shirt sleeves, and his hair was rumpled, as though his fingers had pushed through it dozens of times. Still, there was a look of cultivation about him that separated him from the other two. The shirt he wore was expensive. The trousers, though wrinkled, were tailored exactly to his waist.

Al stood up, smiling. "Hello, Nick. How's it go, boy?"

Nick walked across the room to the fire without answering, and stood staring at the licking flames, eyes hard.

"Nice fire, huh, Nick?" Al asked. "You want me to put some more wood on it? Is it warm enough for you, Nick?"

Jack sat there, half-smiling, looking at his newly polished shoes. He finished the whiskey in his glass, then reached for the bottle.

Nick turned around. "Lay off that stuff."

Jack moved his head, cocking it just a little, looking at Nick. "How's that, Nick?"

"I said lay off that stuff."

Jack smiled. He had large perfectly white teeth. "You suggesting or ordering, Nick?"

"I'm telling you. You figure out what it is. Just lay off, that's all."

"Well, now, Nick—"

"Now, Jack," Al said. "You quit for a little, all right, Jack? He ain't had much, Nick. That's a fact. Just a little bit. Ain't that right, Jack?"

Jack laughed softly, shaking his head. "Christ!"

"Maybe," Nick said, coming back across the room, stopping by the table, looking at both of the others, "you don't really get this. This is Bud's older brother. This isn't Bud Clintock. This is Clintock the goddamn cop. There's a difference maybe you don't get. This is no kid this time. This a tough bastard!"

"Tough!" Jack laughed.

"All right," Nick said, face coloring with anger. "You think he isn't! That's a good way to get off dead, do you understand that? You're not dealing with a cheap punk this time. This cop knows everything there is in the book and twice over that."

"I'll fix him," Jack said, "just like I fixed his goddamn brother."

"You fix a lot of things, don't you?" Nick said, his voice rising. "You fixed things last night, didn't you?"

Jack looked up, eyes flickering faintly.

"Well, look, Nick," the short, squat Al said. "Now you know how that was, Nick. We couldn't help it. You know Carol ran off the road that way."

"Goddamn dame," Jack muttered darkly. "What about that, Nick? You talk about drinking. That dame was fractured. If she hadn't—"

"All right," Nick said. "So you couldn't get to him on the road, but how about—"

"See, Nick," Al said, "we were waiting like that about three miles out of town there. We'd of nailed him sure, Nick, if he'd of kept on coming. We done that sort of thing before real good. You know that, Nick. But, see, he stops for Carol, and when he don't come through like Charlie at the bar says he's going to—"

"Maybe Charlie told him the wrong direction," Jack said insolently.

"No, now Charlie told him right," Al said. "Charlie's all right. He done real good, Jack. I checked with him after, and when he says this guy comes in and checks out like the description Nick here gives him, and then the guy asks about where is this Dick Alexander, why, sure enough, he told him right out west of town. No, now Charlie done it right. It was Carol—"

"Goddamn dame," Jack repeated.

"So anyway, Nick," Al said, "it was the light see? We come back down the road toward town when Clintock don't show, and we see him getting into Carol's car and all, and we follow him, and when he goes into this motel to check in, why, we pull into the court, and we got him. Only it's the light. Ain't it, Jack? That twilight, see? You got to use lights, only it ain't completely dark yet. And things are hard that way, ain't they, Jack?"

Jack sat there, mouth grim. He appeared not to be listening. He turned his head, looking out a window

"So Jack missed him. It wasn't Jack's fault. He's a good shot, Nick. You know that . ."

All of a sudden, Jack was out of his chair, moving across the room. The Luger was out of the holster and in his hand. He slammed the door open. The Luger cracked.

"There!" he yelled, laughing. "You see?"

"What the hell—!" Nick snapped angrily.

Jack ran outside, the other two following.

He ran across the clearing, to the edge of the timber, and poised. The others came up and looked down at the small rabbit. It lay, still alive, blood oozing from a ripped flank.

"It don't take no shotgun with me," Jack said happily. "Hey, look at its eyes, huh?"

The animal's eyes watched them, fright and panic in them. The animal struggled to move, pulling along its torn hind quarter.

Jack's laughter pealed through the woods, and then the Luger cracked again and again. The bullets ripped the rabbit, splattering blood and fur.

Nick's face had turned white. "Goddamn, you crazy bastard! Do you want to bring up everybody in that goddamn town! How crazy can you get, anyway?"

Jack looked at him, eyes thinning.

"You crazy sonofabitch," Nick yelled, "you get drunk and get picked up by the Vegas cops, and you tell them your name is Dick Alexander. Then you bust out of there and hightail it straight to us, and they damn near get you in Tahoe. You make every goddamn newspaper in the seven Western States. And why the hell did you use that name? Why the hell did you bust Bud's head, while we're at it?"

"Shut up," Jack said thickly.

"What?" Nick thundered.

"I told you to shut up, Nick!"

"You're telling me to shut up? I run this goddamn show, have you forgotten that? And no trigger-happy stupid punk is going to—"

Jack lifted the Luger, his face set like stone.

And quite suddenly, Al, stocky and slope-shouldered, stepped forward and struck the younger Jack on the chin. It was a clean jolting blow, and Jack stumbled back and sat down. His eyes glazed for a moment, and then he shook his head, bringing up the Luger still instinctively in his hand. He half rose. Al swiftly moved forward once more, his left fist arcing into Jack's stomach, his right following accurately, catching Jack hard on the cheek bone.

The Luger came out of Jack's hand this time, and Al kicked it away Jack rolled with the force of the blows and hit the ground sprawling. He didn't get up.

Al watched him for a moment, and then he bent over him solicitously. "Now, Jack, I'm sorry about that. You know I am. I don't like to do that. But you got to understand. We work together if we cooperate like, you know? Now Nick here is boss. You know that, Jack. We got to do what Nick says. Nick here is smart. We all come out if we do like Nick here says. It ain't like we got nothing to lose, no matter how it goes. That's a lot of money we're after, Jack. You don't want to forget that. Do you feel all right now, Jack?"

And then Nick, face still white, bent forward toward the still prostrate Jack. "Now you listen, Jack. You listen good. What's done is done. Bud stole that money off of us, after we worked pretty hard to get it. He stuck that money somewhere, and now we think we're getting pretty close to it.

"Now we've done it your way before. We caught up with Bud, and we let you work him over to find out where he'd put that dough. Only you broke his goddamn skull first. Now that's over We're forgetting that, but you'd better keep your nose clean from now on. We're going to get that dough, and nothing is going to stop us. Not your lousing things up. Not Bud's older brother. We're going to get that sixty grand. Do you understand that?"

Jack lay on the ground, not answering.

"Can you get up, all right, Jack?" Al asked.

"Get the hell away from me," Jack said.

"Now, Jack."

"Let him be," Nick said. "Come on, Al. Only take his gun."

"Now, Nick, that ain't necessary, is it? Jack'll behave, you let him keep his gun."

Nick glared at the younger man on the ground, then shrugged. "Come on, Al."

The two walked back toward the large cabin.

"What now, Nick?" Al said.

"We'll talk about it," Nick said shortly.

"How about Carol? It's kind of funny, her getting shacked up that way with Bud's brother."

"Yeah," Nick said. "It is."

"Kind of a what-you-say, coincidence?"

"It really is, isn't it?" Nick said tightly.

"She don't usually go on any bat like that. I mean, Carol, now, she's got class. It don't really figure, her getting tight like that."

"You're thinking a little now," Nick said sarcastically. "Maybe it's about time, huh? Maybe it's about time everybody around here got to thinking, not just me. What do you think about that, Al?"

"Now, Nick," Al said softly. "Jack got you all upset. Everything's going to work out all right. You know me, and Jack don't have your brains, Al. We depend on you like, see? How is it in here, Nick? Is it warm enough for you? Shall I put some more wood on that fire?"

3.

When dawn broke completely, Clintock, the keys to the yellow convertible in his pocket, stepped out of his room into the girl's. She lay sleeping quietly underneath the blanket he'd put around her hours before. Clintock watched her for a moment, then walked to the window and looked outside. The court was silent in the early light. Clintock's eyes roved from one doorway to another. Then he stepped outside.

He walked straight across the court, hands loose at his sides, on out to the blacktop, and then down the road. He walked in steady, even strides until, finally, he reached his own blue sedan.

He drove away from the village. He drove three miles, four. Then he turned off on a small dirt road. He followed it to a dead end. He stared at the empty woods for a moment, then drove back, past the motel, until he reached the roadhouse where he'd stopped the night before. It was closed. Clintock walked around the building and looked at the small house in back. He walked to the door and rapped against it.

A gray-haired woman with a weary face appeared, her body wrapped in a faded brown robe. "Yes?" she said irritatedly.

"The man who runs the bar Does he live here?"

"Yes, but he's asleep. So was I."

"I want to see him."

"Not now," she said. "You can see him when he opens up. At noon."

Clintock looked back of him, his eyes checking. "Now," he said, turning back to the woman and stepping inside.

"Now look here, mister "

Clintock kept moving inside, the woman backing ahead of him. "Get him," he said.

The woman stared at him in astonishment for a second, then disappeared. A moment later, the bartender Clintock had talked to the night before appeared.

There was an angry frown on his face as he pulled a robe around him. Then he looked at Clintock, and Clintock watched his face pale.

"You remember me," Clintock said evenly

"Yes," the man said, his head bobbing. "Yes, sure! How are you anyway? What can I do for you?"

Clintock watched the man knot the cord of the robe, noting the man's trembling hands.

"I asked you about Dick Alexander "

"Yes," the man said. "Sure. I remember."

"You told me where to find him."

"I said I thought I knew where'd you'd find him. I—"

"You told me he lived in a house four miles west, and to the right, off the highway There isn't a house there."

"I must have been wrong then," the man said, his voice shrilling a little.

"You must have been."

"Got the direction wrong. I mean, I don't know This guy, this Alexander, he tells me when he's in here where he lives. I must have got it fouled up."

Clintock licked his lips. "I don't think you got it fouled up."

"How's that?" the man asked, his voice going even higher.

"You were waiting for me to come in and ask for Alexander, weren't you?"

"Me? Waiting?"

You never met a man who called himself Alexander, did you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on!" Clintock snapped. "Spit it out!"

"I got nothing to hide," the man said, whining.

"Alexander's wanted from here to Vegas," Clintock said, voice edged. "The name's an alias to begin with. Now why don't you start telling me the truth."

"I'm telling you the truth, mister That's a fact!"

"How many drinks did you serve the girl?"

"What girl?"

"There was one girl in the bar last night. How many drinks?"

"Why? Maybe two. No, just one. I remember Why?"

"Was she drunk when she came in?"

"Her? Not her "

Clintock stepped forward, moving a hand out, locking steel fingers around the man's arm. The man's wife had reappeared now.

"Who told you what to tell me if I came in looking for Alexander?"

"Nobody, mister," the man cried. "Nobody, honest!"

With his free hand, Clintock suddenly slapped the man's face. The man grunted, taking in his breath. The woman gave a short scream.

"Who was it?" Clintock said, tightening his grip on the man's arm, twisting the man to his knees.

"Don't know . what you're talking about . . "

"I'm telling you—" Clintock said, whispering now, drawing his hand back once more. Then the woman, shrieking once was on him, clawing, fighting.

Clintock let go suddenly, and turned and walked away, his face hard, his eyes black with hate.

He paused only a moment at the doorway, eyes searching ahead, and then he returned to his car He drove down the main street of the town.

The town was old. The buildings looked nearly all to be clapboard. There was a small garage, oil and grease staining the concrete in front, the gas pumps worked by hand. There was a grocery store, a small restaurant. The street ran through the center of the town and the blacktop was pitted; two years before the main highway had cut through here, now the loop of it had been shortened and the town was bypassed by the main traffic. A single car, dusty from travel, passed Clintock's, and moved on out of town. There was a silence, a stillness.

Clintock stopped his car in front of ancient pumps of the garage. Inside the small office, he could see a man in coveralls talking on a telephone. The man hung up. He didn't come out. Clintock got out and walked inside.

"Service is good," Clintock said thinly

"You want something, mister?" the man said. He

was sparrow thin, hands and face greasy. He seemed to be ducking from a blow, without actually doing it.

"I want to find a man called Dick Alexander."

The man's head was shaking back and forth before Clintock had finished speaking. "Not me. I don't know him."

"Maybe you didn't get the name right," Clintock said. "Dick Alexander."

"No, sir," the man said, eyes blinking rapidly. "I don't know him.

"Do you know anything?"

"I don't know anything. Not a thing."

Clintock stood there for a moment longer, and then he wheeled and left. He drove to the grocery store, stopped, started to get out, then did not. He wiped his palms over his eyes. A chill went through him. Then, gunning his engine, he U-turned, and drove back to the motel.

The girl was up; she looked fresh and well-groomed. She had changed to a yellow dress from the bag Clintock had brought in the night before.

"How do you feel?" Clintock asked.

"Shaky Lousy."

Clintock walked across the room and sat down in a chair, so that his back was against a wall, so that he faced all the windows and the door.

"I've been a cop a long time," he said.

She looked at him. "Cop?"

"I know drunks. You weren't drunk last night."

"You should tell my head," the girl said, lifting her hand to her forehead. "It's splitting—"

"Cut it out," Clintock snapped. "I don't have the time. I don't have the patience."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said, sitting down on the bed, sitting down tiredly, shoulders slumping.

"How do you fit in? That's all I want to know."

The girl shook her head stubbornly. "You're not talking sense."

"You weren't drunk when I came into the bar last night. I could see that. The bartender sold you just one drink, and he said you weren't drunk when you came in. It was an act. Why?"

"Who are you, mister?" the girl asked. "What are you after, anyway?"

"I got shot at twice when we pulled in here last night. You stopped me on the road on purpose. Only the rest of it doesn't figure. I wasn't shot at on the road. And this motel was my idea. You couldn't count on that. What's your tie-in with Nick Brady?"

The girl shook her head.

"You know Brady?"

"I know him," she sighed finally.

"Well?"

"I know who you are too, Clint."

Clintock frowned.

"I knew in the bar. The minute you came in. You look exactly like Bud, in the eyes, in the mouth. You're bigger, tougher looking. You look more certain and confident, but I knew you were Bud's brother."

"Okay," Clintock said. "Keep talking."

"I met Bud in San Francisco. I'm a singer. I was singing in a place on Mason Street. Bud used to come in. He didn't like my singing but we—well, it was one of those things. He talked an awful lot about you, Clint. He idolized you. He said you were everything he wasn't. He said you raised him, practically, when your parents died . . ."

"I said keep talking."

The girl put her hands in her lap, looking down. "He got mixed up with Nick Brady."

"And with Jack and Al," Clintock said bitterly.

"Yes. You know the rest."

"You tell me."

The girl shrugged. "They robbed that bank on Sutter."

Clintock's eyes thinned. "Were you a part of that?"

"No. That's honest, Clint. I didn't know. I tried to tell Bud before it happened that—"

"Okay," Clintock said hardly. "Just keep talking. What then?"

"Bud called me from Sacramento. He said to meet him in Reno in three days."

"And?"

"I did."

The girl was silent then, and Clintock stared at her with black eyes.

"I went to this hotel. His door was unlocked. I walked in. He was on the floor, bleeding. He was—" The girl's face had paled.

"I know how he was," Clintock said, knuckles white. "I saw him in the morgue. He had sixteen lacerations of the face. His right arm and nose were broken. Two fingers of his left hand were broken. There was a double compound fracture of the skull."

"Yes," the girl said, nearly whispering.

"Was he dead when you saw him?"

The girl shook her head.

Flickers of flashing light appeared in Clintock's eyes. His face seemed made of stone. "Go on," he said.

"He gave me this—" The girl's hand reached out, picked up her purse, fumbled the lock open, and drew out the billfold. She got out the small medal. "This."

"I saw it last night," Clintock said tonelessly. "My mother gave it to him when he was ten, just before she died. I've got one like it."

The girl nodded, then said, "I could barely hear him speak. He said money. He said something that sounded like cave. He—" The girl shuddered. "He was dead then. I was scared. I got out, phoned the police without telling them who I was, then left."

The cabin was silent. Outside, the town, the land around, the tall trees clustered up the side of the mountain were still as death. Clintock stood up. He

walked to a window, looking out, no wariness in him now.

He turned. "How did you get here?"

"Same way you did, I suppose. I read in the papers about Dick Alexander. I know it was a name Nick Brady had used. I went from town to town. I asked in each place. I asked in the bar here, and the bartender said maybe he could help me."

"They're here then," Clintock said coldly.

"Yes."

"All three?"

"I think so.'

"Where?'

"I don't know. Brady came to the bar to see me. I think Al was with him outside. They'd been expecting you, ever since you told the newspapers in San Francisco that you were going to get the man who killed your brother It wasn't Brady who used the name, you know "

"I know," Clintock said. "The description didn't match. It was Jack."

"Yes. He got drunk, and that was the name he thought of."

"What are they doing here?"

"The money."

Clintock frowned.

"Bud took all the money. He was supposed to meet them with it in Los Angeles, but he didn't. He took it all and went to Reno."

Clintock shook his head.

"You don't believe that, do you?" the girl asked. "You think Bud was just taken in by them, don't you? He wasn't, Clint. He knew what he was doing. Maybe you couldn't see the change in him. I could. He helped think up that robbery, and he helped figure out a plan that would give him a chance to get away with all of it."

"You're a cheap liar," Clintock said coldly.

"I'm a lot of things," the girl said. "But I'm telling the truth about this. That's why they beat him up, to get it out of him, where he'd hidden the money. They found him, Clint, before I got to him. Brady is smart. He's got a lot of contacts. I think he figured the possible places Bud might go and told people. And then got word that Bud was in Reno. They went there, and—"

All of a sudden, Clinton reached out and pulled the girl up from the bed. He pulled her into him, crushing her, moving his hands over her, kissing her. He let go of her finally, pushing her away, and she half fell to the bed.

"Cheap," he whispered.

"Animalism is contagious, Clint," she said softly. Her hands brought a handkerchief from her purse and she touched her mouth, the handkerchief coming away stained with blood from her cut lip. "It gets into people. I feel it for you, Clint. That's why I did that the way I did it. It's a hunger for the part of Bud I loved, but never had. It's a lust created out of killing and stealing. I've got lust, Clint, because of what I don't have."

Clintock half turned away, breathing hard.

"You feel it too, don't you, Clint? You liked the way I responded to your lust. You'd like to match it. Do you know why, Clint? Because the animalism is in you too, now You've let hate grow in you. You've got blood in your eye, Clint. You want to kill and ravage. Ravage me if you must, Clint, but let the other go."

She brought her head up determinedly. She looked at the dark profile of his face.

"Clint, I know what happened. It was Jack who killed Bud. I can see him doing it. Exactly how he did it. Jack is an animal, and maybe he's infected all of us. He wanted that money, and only Bud knew where it was."

"No," Clintock breathed.

"Oh, yes," the girl said. "That's why I'm here, Clint. I want the money too. I want that sixty thousand dollars. Why else would I be here?"

"Bud wouldn't do it that way He—"

"Bud was no good," the girl said.

Clintock turned back to her, muscles flickering along his cheeks.

"Hit me," the girl said. "All right. But Bud was no good, no better than the rest of them, no better than Jack—"

She drew in her breath, waiting, but Clintock's hand did not move. His eyes watched her, steadily penetrating.

"You believe me, don't you?" she asked finally. "You knew that all along."

He wouldn't speak. His eyes were like ice.

"Yes," the girl nodded, sighing. "Yes, but it doesn't matter anymore what you do believe. You want to kill now You want an eye for an eye. Nothing else makes any difference.

"Clint," she said, looking up hopefully, "I see better than that in you. I see what I couldn't see but only hoped I saw in Bud. I saw that when you walked into that bar last night. Clint—that was why I did what I did. Why I faked the drunkeness. I knew the bartender called Brady the instant you asked for Dick Alexander I knew when he told you where to find Dick Alexander that it was a trap. They were waiting for you. They would have killed you."

Clintock walked across the room, wary once more. He turned, his eyes looking at her impersonally.

"You don't know where they are?"

"No. Do you believe me, Clint? That I'm everything wrong, maybe, but that I don't want to see you hurt, warped? Do you believe that?"

"I'll find them."

"They're waiting for you. They'll kill you."

"They're somewhere near "

"But you don't know where. Nobody will tell you. They've got the advantage. They can hide, and you have to search. They're hidden. You're in

the open. Do you want to die, Clint?"

"No."

The girl nodded, mouth twisting bitterly. "But only because you wouldn't be able to kill them then."

Once more Clintock sat down, against the wall, facing the windows, the door

"There's a map in the glove compartment in my car," he told her "Get it for me, please. And give me that medal, will you?" His voice was edged with steel, as cold and piercing as the quick thrust of a sharp knife into soft flesh.

4.

In the cabin in the clearing, Al poked at the wood in the fireplace. Nick, sitting beside the table, looked up. "Let it go, Al. It's warming up. We'll fry in here, if you keep that goddamn fire going."

"Sure, Nick," Al said, straightening quickly. "Sure, you bet!"

Then the thin, young Jack appeared in the room. His hair had been freshly combed. He wore a fresh shirt. There was a smile on his lips once again.

"Hello, Jack!" Al said explosively. "You feel better now, kid?"

"Sure, Al," Jack smiled. "Sure, fine."

Nick watched the youth carefully, then turned his chair, stretching his legs.

"Sit down, Jack."

Jack nodded. "Thanks, Nick." He sat down.

"We want to stay out of trouble now You understand that, don't you, Jack?"

"Sure, Nick. I understand that."

"I wasn't kidding you about this Clintock, kid. He's dangerous. And he means business about this. He and his kid brother, they were pretty close."

"Sure, Nick. I understand."

"You know why we can't fool around then. Why we can't take any chances. He's going to come looking for us, Jack. We've got to be careful. We've got to get all the advantages. Do you understand why Al had to bruise you up a little out there, kid?"

"Yeah, Nick. I understand."

Al came up, smiling apologetically "No hard feelings, huh, Jack?"

Jack smiled. "Hell, no, Al. No hard feelings." He looked at the bottle on the table, then reached over and very carefully capped it. "I understand. We got to be careful, all right. We got to get that money."

"That's right, Jack," Nick said. "Now you're talking."

"That's a lot of money, all right," Jack said. "Sixty thousand. How does that split, Nick? I'm not good at figuring. I mean the usual split?"

"Fifteen for you," Nick said. "Fifteen for Al. I take fifteen for myself. And then I put away fifteen to use on operations later."

Jack shook his head. "That's a lot of money, all right. Do you think we're going to find it, all right, Nick?"

"I know we are," Nick said.

Jack leaned forward, smiling. "How do you know, Nick?"

Nick returned the smile faintly "We traced where Bud went this far, didn't we? We found Bud was here right after the robbery, that he was here for two days. Right?"

"Right," Jack nodded.

"Now Carol comes along. Why?"

Jack shook his head. "Who knows? Maybe the same reason the cop comes along. I shouldn't have used that name "

"Maybe," Nick said. "But maybe not. Who was it reported Bud dead in Reno?"

"It was," Al said, "how-you-say, anonymous?"

"But a woman," Nick said. "The papers said it was a woman, phoning from a public booth."

"Carol," Al said.

"I think so. So maybe she knows something."

"How?" Jack said. "Bud was dead when we left."

"Maybe," Nick said. "Maybe not. You can't tell for sure."

"He should have been dead," Jack said irrelevantly, smiling.

"But figure maybe he wasn't. That maybe he said something to her He wouldn't tell us where the money was. Maybe he told her."

"Is that why she's here?"

"Maybe. Maybe she traced us out and knew we were coming close, and maybe that's why she's here, not knowing what we know or don't know Maybe she's scared we're going to run off with it. Only maybe, too, she's scared to go get it just yet, figuring maybe we'll take it away from her How does that sound?"

"So," Jack said, "why don't we just kind of get it out of her?"

Nick nodded. "That's what I figured to do yesterday, after I talked to her at the bar Just wait a little to see if she'd go after it, and then if she didn't, I'd just let you, Jack, kind of talk her into it—only being more careful than you were with Bud. But this cop comes along."

"So?" Jack asked.

"You figure it out, Jack," Nick said. "You ever see Carol drink too much when she was working in this joint where Bud used to go see her all the time?"

Jack shook his head thoughtfully.

"Well, Al thought of that, didn't you, Al?"

"Yeah," Al said, head bodding. "I thought of that."

"So what?" Jack said. "So what does that mean?"

"You thought she was tight last night, when she goes off the road. Well, this girl doesn't get tight. And then it's kind of funny, isn't it, that she goes

off the road just in front of this cop, just when we've got him set up and you and Al are waiting to gun him? Right?"

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, Nick. That's kind of funny, all right."

"So maybe she knew what she was doing, huh? Maybe she wants on the cop's side, to kind of keep us off of her. How about that? How does that sound?"

"Yeah," Jack said slowly "Yeah. You're smart, all right, Nick. I got to hand it to you. But so what do we do now?"

"Wait, kid. Just wait. We got this town in the palm of our hand, do you know that? They're scared of us. They're going to cooperate. When the girl or that cop makes a move, we're going to know about it. This bartender, this joker in the roadhouse there, he runs this town, and he's got the word out. If they don't want trouble, they cooperate. They don't want any trouble. How about that?"

"Yeah," Al said happily, "how about that? How about that, Jack?"

Jack nodded reflectively "Yeah, that's good thinking, Nick. That really is. You're a smart one, all right, Nick. You really are."

"So everything's going to be swell now, huh?" Al said eagerly. "No hard feelings by anyone now, and pretty soon we all get fifteen grand, and fifteen stuck away for the future, like you say. Ain't this nice, after all, Jack? You ain't mad about me busting you a little out there, are you, Jack?"

Jack laughed softly, shaking his head. "Hell, no, Al."

Al put his hand on Jack's shoulder gratefully. And then he said, "Well, me, I'm going out to get some more wood. I chopped it up out there in back yesterday. I don't get cold easy myself, but I don't want you boys should get cold tonight. It gets cold at night, do you know that? Jack, do you want to come along? Fresh air is good for you. What are you going to do, Nick?"

"Get some sleep," Nick said. "Wake me in a little while, will you? I don't want to sleep too long."

"Sure, Nick," Al said. "Do you want to come along, Jack?"

Jack stood up. "Sure, Al. I think I will at that."

Al grinned happily. "I feel good again. Does everybody feel good?" He watched Jack fold his jacket over his arm. "That's right, kid. Take that along. You don't want to get chilly out there."

Outside, a sun was rising toward the middle of the sky, but the chill was not entirely out of the air. A breeze was coming down from the mountain, from beyond where, higher in the range, snow lay over peaks.

"This is good air," Al said, striding along, leading Jack down a small path away from the cabin. "How do you like this air, kid?"

"Fine, Al," Jack said. "Just fine."

"We had air like this back home. When I was a little kid, I mean. We lived in the country. Did I ever tell you that, Jack?"

"No, Al."

"Sure, I come from the country. I'll bet you didn't know that, kid, did you?"

"I really didn't."

"This all reminds me of home somehow," Al said. "Maybe that's why I like chopping the wood and fixing the fire and all like that. I used to do that when I was a kid."

They had reached the place where Al had chopped the wood the day before now, and Al, Jack behind him, surveyed it proudly

And then Jack said, "Turn around, Al."

Al turned around, eyebrows lifting a little in surprise.

"What's up, Jack?"

The Luger was out of Jack's holster, and he was wrapping his jacket around it carefully, smiling.

"Say, what's going on, Jack?" Al said puzzled.

"You know what I told you back in the cabin, Al? About how I wasn't mad about you busting me?"

"Sure, Jack," Al said, blinking.

"I didn't mean that, Al," Jack said. "I didn't mean that at all."

Al, eyes widening, started to speak, but the first bullet caught him in the throat. He made a wild half-flutter with his arms, and then another slug in the belly doubled him. Jack pumped two more bullets into him as he lay crumpled on the ground, the shots echoing muffledly as the gun exploded within the jacket. And then, eyes bright, lips twisting in a wider grin, Jack began kicking ferns around the inert form.

Minutes later, in a bedroom of the cabin where a shade dimmed the morning light, Nick opened his eyes, looking at a smiling Jack sitting on a chair beside the bed. Jack's hands rested limply on his knees as he watched the drowsy Nick awaken.

"What the hell's up, anyway?" Nick said sluggishly.

"You know that split you figured out, Nick?" Jack said.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"You got to figure that over, Nick."

Nick blinked, trying to plunge entirely back to reality, and at the same moment, he could hear the telephone start ringing steadily, insistently.

5.

Before she'd left the motel, before she'd driven to the roadhouse, and told the bartender that she wanted to talk to Dick Alexander, Carol Adams had stood in the small room of the motel cabin and looked at Clintock.

"You're sure of everything then, Clint?"

"Sure enough," Clintock had said coldly.

"Bud's medal is a St. Christopher medal. There's a Christopher hill."

"You saw it on the map. Bud said cave. The money's in a cave on the hill."

"You know now, then, that I was right about Bud—that he was bad, all bad."

"You want to get started?" Clintock asked, not looking at her. He took out his gun, checking it.

"You don't care about the money?"

Clintock shook his head. "I don't care about the money If you do, you can take it and leave. I won't do anything about it. It means nothing to me."

"Do *I*, Clint? Maybe I won't be getting the money, after all. It's a risk, you know. I could be killed too."

"Stay away from them, when you get near the cave," Clintock said flatly.

"If I can," the girl said. "Otherwise—" She looked at him closely. "You really don't care, do you, Clint? You care only about revenge, about killing. You know your brother for what he was now, and you know this is the way people like him wind up, with their heads cracked open, because they ask for it. But you don't care about that. You care only about killing. Are you any better, Clint? Are you any better than any of them?"

"You'd better take off," Clintock said.

"Sure," the girl said. "So long, Clint. Happy days."

And she had driven to the roadhouse, and now she was waiting, hands trembling a little. A few moments later, the bartender reappeared. "Okay," he said nervously. "They'll meet you. One mile south of town. On the road that goes out from the garage over there."

Carol stood up. "Thank you."

She walked to her car mechanically. She drove out the road that junctioned by the garage. She stopped at the second junction, just a mile out of town. The air was completely still now Not a leaf moved. There wasn't a cloud moving in the sky.

She waited five minutes, ten. And then, suddenly, a hand came in over the window and locked around her waist. She jumped, stiffling a half scream, and looked into the face of Jack.

"Hand your purse out," Jack said softly.

She did, and Jack released her hand and opened the purse and ran a hand through it. His eyes flickered from hers to behind her, to beyond, to the woods behind. "Out," he said.

She got out, and he stood very near her.

"Let's go," he said. "My car."

He walked with her so closely that it was difficult to move. "What kind of a guy is that cop, anyway?" Jack asked. "Is he a good shot?"

"I don't know," she said.

"You know where the money is, though," he said, "don't you?"

She looked at him, fright in her eyes. "Where are the others?"

He laughed softly.

She didn't question him further. She got in the car behind the wheel at his command, and he got in with her. He sat right beside her, close beside her. "Okay, honey. Go now."

She drove to the point she and Clintock had picked on the map. "Up through there," she said, pointing. The bank rose, trees stretching upward, old branches cracked from former storms lying across lower limb junctures.

"I'll tell you this," Jack said, "you try anything at all, honey, I don't mind killing today. I've got the feeling for it, you might say. You might say, in an event like you try something, I'd like to kill better than I'd like to get my hands on that dough. Do I reach you, honey?"

She nodded woodenly.

"Then we move again," Jack said, smiling.

6.

Higher up the mountain, a thousand yards up the mountain, Clintock waited.

The cave was down and to his right; he had a good view of the entrance, hidden himself by thick ferns and the foliage of a low-sweeping limb.

He waited, and while he did so, his hand slid out the Cobra from the shoulder holster. His fingers grazed lightly over the metal surface.

In the sky, the sun moved along its highest arc, and somewhere now, a squirrel had begun chattering; a small branch cracked high in a tree, finally giving in to the pressure of the wind that floated above the tree-protected sweep of land below.

That wind did filter down, a few thousand yards away, trembling the ferns around the unmoving shape of a man, a thick wide-shouldered man, who even in death, carried the look of surprise in his staring eyes.

No wind disturbed the fur of what once had been a rabbit. The stiffening of death clotted even the fluffy coat, and the law of the forest was already at work. A string of ants moved purposefully through yellow and red leaves. A small black snake waited patiently.

The law of nature, Clintock thought. The law of reprisal. Life started and was bitten off. Man, in his movement, was nothing permanent, even at best. The hurrying of death was relative. An eye for an eye . . .

Smoke that Clintock could not see now rolled forth from a brick chimney. The flame had died, only red coals down within the blackened shaft remained, only enough heat to billow the smoke upward remained. There was a small snap, like a tiny gun explosion, as the grains of heated wood expanded. And now, across the room, diagonally from

the mouth of that fireplace, blood had stopped spilling from the white flesh of the man who lay sprawled across a table, a hand a few inches away from a silent telephone. Death appeared, strangely, like sleep. Shirt and trousers, oddly, still looked expensive and vital to the man, who no longer breathed.

7.

Clintock waited and watched, and then he saw them approaching—down, to his left. He lifted his gun, sighting, eyes cold and deadly

The girl, now, moved in exact unison with the slim, black-haired Jack. One of Jack's arms circled her waist, and they moved slowly, with difficulty, because of their closeness. Clintock's trigger finger tightened a fraction. The accuracy of a small gun was limited; the target was limited.

So, Clintock thought, even if she dies too

He felt no tremor of remorse, no emotion of regret. The taste of killing was full in his system now, in his mouth like the bite of a poison herb.

Clintock kept his eyes on Jack, outlining the youth's head, squinting carefully at the profile of chin and nose and forehead. A bullet sent accurately through the left temple, cracking the skull . . .

The girl shifted into Clintock's sights, as the two below moved. Clintock's finger did not release its knowing pressure against the trigger of the Cobra.

Now, Clintock thought, as the girl shifted again, slightly away from the gun sights . . .

And then suddenly, the girl jerked away, tearing from the hard clutch of the black-haired Jack. A sound of angry swearing came up to Clintock, and then, the double crack of Jack's gun. The girl had struck for the bushes now, and Clintock saw her stumble as the gun in Jack's hand jerked, puffed. Clintock, coldly, fired his own gun, watching the gun leap out of Jack's hand. A cry of pain echoed through the woods, as Jack ducked, rolling.

Once, Clintock thought, through the forearm . . .

He waited, watching. Bushes moved now, as the figure of Jack slid slowly back toward where the gun had bounced. Clintock fired just ahead of the movement, and the movement stopped.

Clintock waited, and then finally, the bushes trembled once more. Clintock fired again. Then the bushes moved in the opposite direction, as Jack, forsaking his gun, began his escape.

Clintock smiled. A little further now, he thought, watching. A little further . . .

The terrain opened up just in front of the cave. There was a moment of hesitation, then Jack plunged into the clearing, driving for the protection of the cave.

Clintock carefully fired once more, and the youth half skipped, then stumbled to his knees. He started to get up again, trying to claw his way ahead. He stopped, unable to move fast enough.

Once, Clintock thought, through the left ankle . . .

Jack whirled, on one knee, spreading his arms frantically. "No . please!" He began to cry, wildly, pleadingly.

Clintock's mind blanked to nothing but the image of the youth, outlined in his sights. He held the gun carefully, rock-steady He held the gun and sighted and tasted the hate, the rising jubilation. Alive now, he thought, and then dead so quickly, so certainly . .

And then, suddenly, a slim hand was on his wrist, edging the gun up, out of position.

Clintock turned, blinking. He looked at the girl, at the small scratch above her left eye where a branch had broken the skin. His eyes gazed over her wholly.

"You're all right," he breathed, a surprising exultation going through him, a strangely satisfying exultation.

"Yes, Clint," she said softly.

Clintock licked his lips. "That's fine," he said.

He looked back down at the crying, shaking Jack, motionless now, except for the jerks of his crying spasms.

"Don't, Clint," the girl said.

Clintock was breathing hard now, and once more his hand moved the gun into position.

"I'll go get help," the girl said. "You can bring him in now. You don't have to kill him."

Clintock shook his head, trigger finger pressing once more.

"No, Clint," the girl breathed.

And then suddenly Clintock lowered the gun, sweat prickling his forehead.

Her hand squeezed around his wrist once more, and then she was gone.

Clintock stood up, picturing her moving down, back to the car. She was whole, alive, not hurt. That was the important thing, he discovered, surprised at the discovery.

And then he was moving down toward the helpless, shaking Jack, eyes cold upon the man, but knowing inside, satisfiedly, proudly, that he himself had not killed that day, and would not.

FOURTEEN YEARS OLD!" Banner's voice was hollow. He held up the pocket snapshot that had just been passed to him. "A face like a dream, pretty blonde hair and all."

Mill dropped his feet from the desk, swivelled back in his chair and nodded slowly. "An average case as far as I'm concerned. You're going to prosecute it, Mr Assistant District Attorney, so you might as well get the facts straight."

"What did she do, this girl?"

Mill crossed one foot over the other and rubbed it with thumb and forefinger. "It's quite a story. We had to ask a lot of questions to get the real answers. We wanted to know *why* she did it. Maybe you'd like to know about the why, first." He sighed. "Being a cop is such a rough job on the nerves because a cop can't afford to have nerves."

Mill liked to make little speeches about what it took to be a cop. In the years that Banner had known him, four or five, it happened at least once whenever they met. They weren't close friends; Mill couldn't talk about much but a cop's job. He seemed to have no outside interests at all.

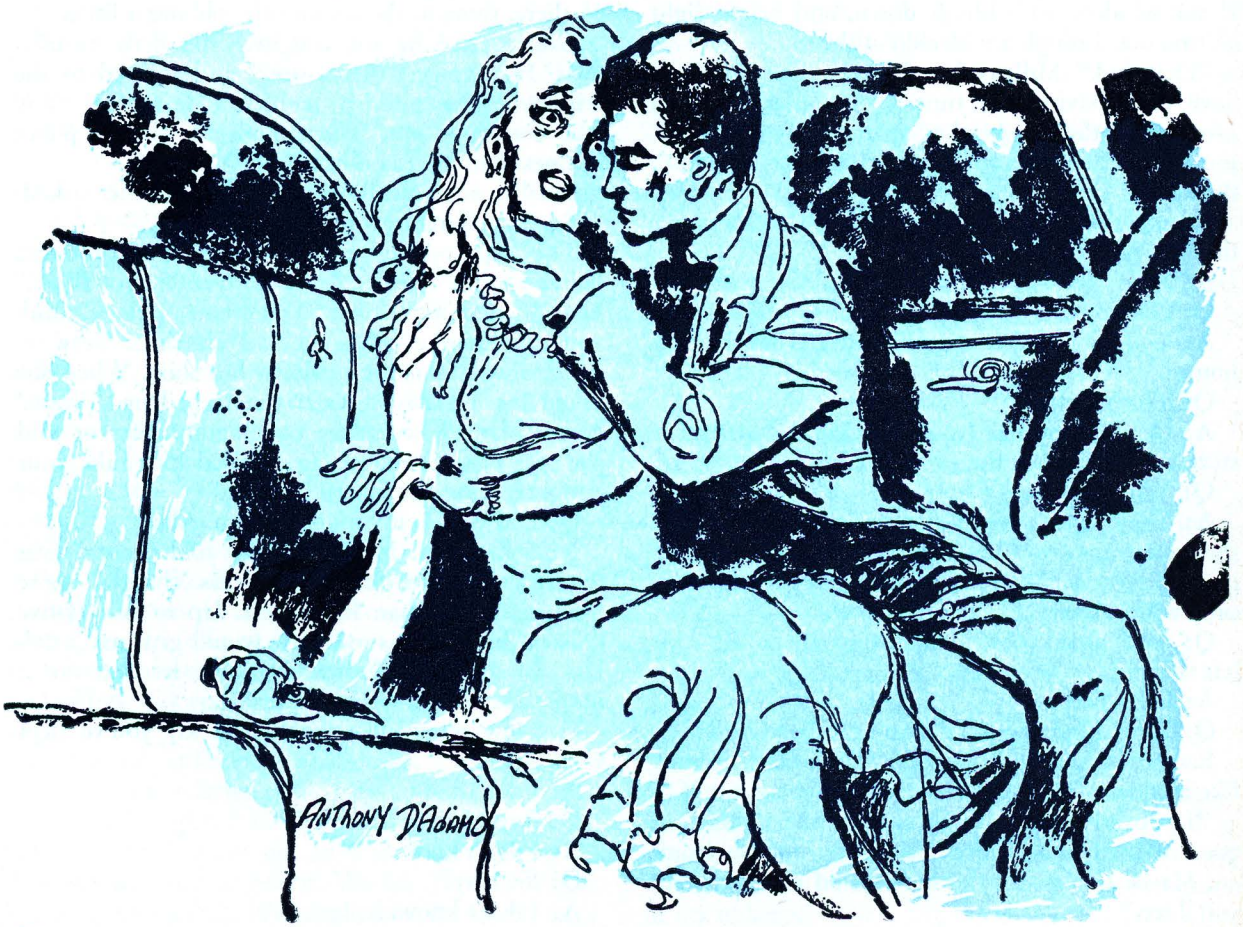
"If you look this over," Mill said, pointing to a

by

MARK MALLORY

GIRL FRIEND

Alice and Ronald were good decent kids.
That was why Alice was on trial for her life.



number of typewritten sheets clipped together, "you'll get some idea. What you got to know about a girl like this is that it's not all her fault, no matter what kind of nasty thing she did."

Banner picked up the sheets and settled them in his lap. They were in question-and-answer form. The girl's name was Alice King.

Q: How old are you, honey?

A: Fourteen. Fourteen, last December.

Q: What school do you go to, Alice?

A: Marley Junior High.

Q: You get good grades?

A: B's and B-plusses.

Q: Do you have a lot of boy friends?

A: No!

Banner frowned at the pocket-size photograph. "Good-looking kid. Why's she so quick to say she hasn't got a lot of boy friends?"

Mill scratched his foot again, then the back of an ear. He lit a cigar and puffed until it was drawing nicely. "Nothing else she could say. Of course at the time I didn't know it, myself. Don't forget we had just picked her up a little while before."

It had grown dark, and Mill flicked on the desk lamp. In the building, on three sides of them, men scurried back and forth. Outside the window, a pink dot could be seen far away, apparently the bathroom of a private home. Close to it was a larger window with blinds down, and bright light glaring out through a wider slit at the top.

"That kid," Mill said suddenly "She ought to have been having the time of her life, going to proms and things. At that age, a girl's just finding out that she *is* a girl, and she sure as hell likes the idea."

Banner shrugged, then looked down to the sheet that was now on top.

A: No!

Q: Did you ever have a job, Alice?

A: You mean a job where I worked outside my house?

Q: That's right.

A: Only part-time. I worked in a department store for a while, but the job didn't last.

Q: Why not?

A: They were stingy—cheap, you know—and they kept me working after hours and wouldn't pay me extra for that. My mother said it was practically white slavery She told them off.

Q: And after your mother told them off, you left the job?

A: I was fired.

Q: What kind of a job did you get then, Alice?

Banner looked up, frowning. "The mother sounds like a louse. Alice doesn't want to talk about her "

"If you ask me," Mill shrugged, "the mother's a good-natured, hearty, heavy drinking, foolish woman. Maybe that's why the kid—go on reading, Ban, you'll see."

Q: What kind of a job did you get then, Alice?

A: In a dress shop, but just about the same thing happened. So my mother said I ought to work for her. She said she'd pay me ten dollars a week if I'd keep the house nice and clean before she—uh, worked.

Q: Sounds like a soft touch.

A: It was okay, for a while.

Q· What went sour?

A: I might as well tell you. Usually, mother kept me away from the house till half-past twelve at night. I'd stay over at a girl friend's place. But sometimes I had trouble with some of the customers. One of them, a Mr. Dail, sees mother twice a week. He happened to come in a little earlier once when I was cleaning. Mr Dail took one look at me and said to mother: "I'd pay twenty dollars for just a half hour with her "

Q: What did your mother say?

A: She said no. She said she wouldn't let her kid do that. But Mr Dail, he kept talking about it and after a few minutes, mother said that the rent was coming up in a few days and she was paying more than usual for protection. To the cops, I mean.

Q: So you went into the bedroom with Mr. Dail?

A: Mother said I wouldn't have any trouble. When Mr. Dail and I, the two of us, were finished, she was making jokes about it. All the time we were in there, though, she sat outside sobbing a little.

Banner, looking up, caught Mill's drily amused eyes. He avoided them, stood and walked to the window. The pinkish bathroom light far away had been put out. The sounds of routine police business had increased in tempo.

Finally, after swallowing quickly, Banner asked. "Did Alice King turn pro?"

The cop, openly pleased by Banner's interest, pointed to the sheets. "Read the q-and-a, you'll see." He added thoughtfully, "You know, I don't think you can imagine what the kid was like. Very refined, always smoothing down her skirt. When she asked for a glass of water she tacked on, 'please.' Never blamed her crime on circumstances or said she was victimized. In fact, a good kid. Like your daughter would be, if you had one."

Q: Did you do it with other men, Alice?

A: Sometimes. Mother always told them I was twelve and a virgin. She always charged more money for me than for herself. Up to twenty-five dollars. After it was over, she would give me 5 dollars for myself. Mother wouldn't let me do it more than twice a week.

Q: How many men would you say you've slept with, Alice?

A: I don't know.

Q: Ten? Is it that many?

A: I don't know.

Q: Twenty?

A: I don't know.

Q: Thirty? Forty? Fifty? Give me a number that's close to the truth, Alice.

A: Fifty, maybe.

Mill said, "You can skip the part where she gives names. The Vice Squad boys have picked up the ones she remembers, and they're in for a bad time. Your boss, the D.A., he'll see to that."

Banner said quietly: "At least I know now what you're holding the girl for Delinquency. An easy case to prosecute. In her set-up, it could have been something worse."

"It was. It is." Mill looked intently at the tip of his cigar, talked slowly to it. "A hell of a lot worse."

In spite of himself, Banner lowered his head.

Mill added. "Alice King has good stuff in her, as a person. You take the average 14-year-old girl and put her in that spot and she becomes like the mother, you know—shiftless, lazy, vain, a stupid slob. Alice didn't."

Banner glanced at the snapshot.

"I don't mean just for looks," Mill said a little impatiently. "There's other things in a kid's life. Alice King kept up her grades at Marley Junior High, even improved them in one case. She started to appreciate ballet and modern dance. She did some dating. Normal, in other words, except for what she did twice a week."

Banner looked a little sadly at the picture. Suddenly he stiffened and set it face down on the desk. He was flushed.

Mill smiled. "Thinking you'd like to jump the kid yourself, I bet!" More seriously he added, "One of the hard things about being a cop is that you can excuse the bad in most people because it's in you, too . . . Give me the sheets, will you, for a minute?"

Banner slowly handed them across. The cop turned four pages, his wet thumb driving a crease into every one, then a fifth.

"Here it is. Where she meets Ronald Hutchinson."

Banner's lip curled. "Another customer?"

"Another kid. Fifteen, in fact. I found out a lot about him. A big wheel at Marley Junior High: baseball team in summer and football in winter, editor of the school paper, member of Arista, student president of the G.O. And rich, too. Lot of dough in the family. Old man is president of a chain of supermarkets."

"The kid sounds like a snob."

"No." Mill shook his big head determinedly, and tapped a crown of ash off the cigar "Nice, healthy kid with a lot of girl friends. A good-looking kid with nice manners."

Q: How did you come to meet Ronald Hutchinson?

A: I went out for the school paper.

Q: Oh, you volunteered to work for it.

A: That's right. I thought I wanted to be a reporter when I grow up, so I took a crack at it. Ron was the student editor. We hit it off, all right. We liked each other. We laughed at the same things and had a lot in common. I always think that's very important with a boy and girl.

Q: Tell me what happened between you two.

A: Nothing did, at the start. I knew he'd want to take me out, but I didn't rush him. He waited two weeks. There was going to be a dance in the gym at school on Saturday night and he asked me to go with him. I said I would.

Q. Did he call you at home?

A: No, I never want boys to call me at home. It can get confusing.

Q: How did your mother feel about your taking off Saturday night?

A: Mother said it was fine, because she wants me to have good times. She doesn't want to interfere with my social life.

Q: That's for sure. So you and Ron Hutchinson hit it off, I suppose.

A: The first date, at the dance, was very sweet. Ron couldn't samba, so a bunch of us showed him. It was a lot of fun. After that, I saw him in school. It got so that we used to hold hands over the lockers in our 'official' rooms. That means the rooms where students do things as a class, you know, according to what the principal wants.

Q You were dating Ron pretty heavily?

A: We had a few cheap dates, first. We'd meet at the ice cream parlor and he'd buy me a soda and we'd sit and talk. We had an awful lot in common. Once in a while we'd go see a movie and hold hands. Then he'd walk home with me and say goodnight a block from the house. I never let boys call for me at the house.

Q: You didn't mind the cheap dates?

A: No, they were fun. Ron said that the whole town knew about his being rich, so he didn't have to impress girls by flashing a roll. A *bank*roll, he meant.

Q In other words, you had nothing against Ron Hutchinson.

A: That's right, nothing.

Q. No grudge of any kind.

A: Of course not.

Q: Did you think you were in love with him?

A: I suppose so.

Q: You were serious about him, then?

A: Yes. Almost praying I could keep him interested till I was eighteen, so we could get married. That shows you what a fool I was!

Q Why a fool?

A: On account of what happened.

Q How many times a week did you see him?

A. Two, three.

Q: How did your mother feel about that?

A: At first she thought it was very nice and she told me not to give away anything, if you know what I mean. Then she said I ought to be home at nights, to work if I had to. She said expenses were going up and I ought to be paying a bigger share of my upkeep.

Q: How did you feel about that?

A: I wanted to get a job in a store, instead, but my mother didn't want that.

Q: The two of you argued?

A: Yes. I started to get sick when I had to use the bedroom with one of the customers. Sometimes I'd throw up or say that I had cramps.

Q: Tell me about last night—Saturday night.

A: Mother was a little under the weather. She wanted me to stay with one of our customers. The man came in, Mr. Cameron, and I just got sick when I saw him. I started to cry Mother got angry, but when she saw she was licked anyhow, she told me to go.

Q: You had a date with Ron?

A: We were headed for a party over a friend of his' house.

Q: How about the knife, Alice? How come you took a pocketknife along with you on a date?

Banner caught his breath.

A My mother thinks its a good idea to bring one, in case a girl gets into a spot where she needs a little help. Mother isn't like most people, you know, and she always tells me to be very careful when I go out on a date and never go beyond necking. When we're alone, she calls the customers animals. She always warns me that men are after one thing and a girl has to use any way possible to keep —well, you know

Q: And you believe that?

A: Mother's had more experience than me.

Q: So you took a pocketknife along on every date?

A: Most of them. It came in handy for little things, you know, like cutting open envelopes. I never had to use it to scare off a boy. Not till last night, that is.

Q: Ron made a pass at you?

A: We were at Baker's Lane. You know, a lot of cars stop there for couples to neck in peace and quiet. Ron had borrowed his dad's car for the date. He said to me. "What about it, honey?" He put a hand under my dress and started slowly unbuttoning it from behind. Like one of the customers does, Mr. Strawbridge, that is. Anyhow, I tried to stop Ron. I said: "I'm not one of those girls." And to make a joke out of it, to show I meant it for a joke, I pulled out the pocketknife and said: "Better not." Of course I said it in such a way he was sure it was a joke.

Q: He didn't give up trying, did he?

A: No. He was very calm, very patient, very sure of himself and sure what would happen. Like a customer. Any customer. I was sitting there with my knuckles in my mouth to keep from making a sound. Then Ron fumbled with something in his breast pocket and brought out a wallet and spread it open. He said very seriously: "I hope you'll let me buy things for you, and make life easier for you. A girl and her mother alone always have a rough time," he glanced down at my dress, my best dress, "and I'd be glad to help. The money doesn't mean a thing to me." And all the time he was running a thumb over the bills in his wallet just like one of the customers before he pays. Just like Mr. Dail. The exact same . . ."

Q: All right, all right! We'll pick up the questioning later on. The way you're crying, a person would think I'd belted you one. Strike that!

Mill said thoughtfully: "She was in love with rich-boy Ron and, when he offered to buy her, just like one of the customers would, she acted blindly with the knife."

One of Mill's hands stiffened in a fist; he stuck out a forefinger and stabbed it suddenly against his heart.

Banner stared at the finger, then quickly looked away.

THE NEXT ISSUE!

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The tale of a butcher, his meat cleaver, and his bloody compulsion

THE RIVAL ACT by Richard Prather

A story of two lover-boys in action

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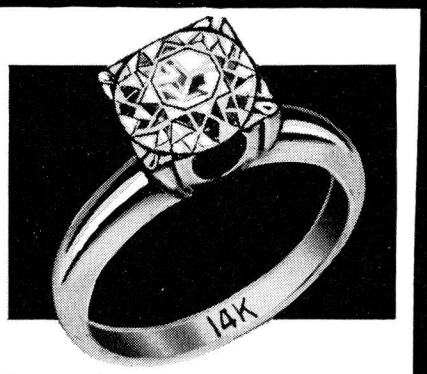

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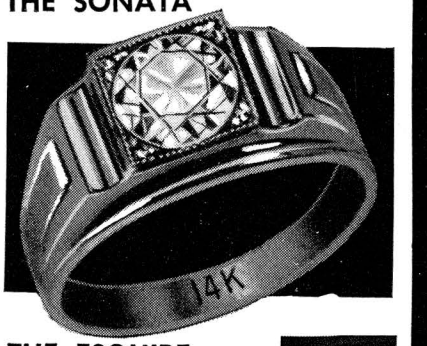

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NEW ORLEANS (12): Int'l Trade Mart
SAN FRANCISCO (4): 127 Montgomery St.
CANADA: 1323 Bay St., Toronto, Ontario

DINERS' CLUB Empire State Bldg., New York 1, N.Y.

FOR OFFICE USE

full name_____

home address_____ city_____ state_____

home phone_____ rent home_____ own home_____ years_____

company name_____ nature of business_____

address_____ city_____ state_____

business phone_____ years with above firm_____ position_____

bank_____ branch_____ regular ☐ special ☐ savings ☐

charge accounts at_____

if new account, check here ☐ if addition to existing account, show number_____

CHECK ONE ONLY ▸ COMPANY ACCOUNT bill to office address ☐ PERSONAL ACCOUNT bill to office address ☐ PERSONAL ACCOUNT bill to home address ☐

10-NY-MAN-3

$5.00 annual membership fee: enclosed ☐ bill me ☐
(INCLUDES DINERS' CLUB NEWS, 1 YR. SUBSCRIPTION SIXTY CENTS)
card holder assumes individual responsibility with company applicant

signature of individual applicant_____

signature of executive authorizing company account_____ title_____